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THE SILVER ZONE

THE SILVER ZONE

A HINDU NOVEL

BY KATHLEEN P. EMMETT

(MRS. FOLEY)

'Tied round her waist the zone of bells that sounded
with ravishing melody.'—*Song of Jayadeva*

LONDON

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TO
H.R.H. THE PRINCESS OF WALES
IN COMMEMORATION OF
HER ROYAL HIGHNESS'S
MEMORABLE VISIT TO DEHRA DOON, WHICH
HAS LEFT AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION OF LOVE AND
LOYALTY ON THE HEARTS OF EVERY SECT INHABITING
THE VALLEY, THE AUTHOR HAS,
BY GRACIOUS AND SPECIAL PERMISSION,
THE HONOUR TO DEDICATE THIS STORY, WHICH IS
BUT THE FAINT ECHO OF A CHIME OF
EASTERN BELLS

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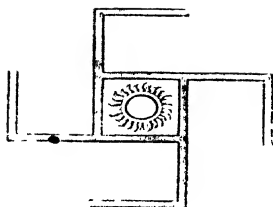
THE PRESENT VALLEY

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A HINDU SYMBOL. THE EARTH REVOLVING
ROUND THE SUN

PART I.
THE PRESENT VALLEY

CHAPTER I

THE LUCK-BRINGER

DAYSRING—the fragrant, breath-bringing dawn that breaks in misty radiance over the plains of India. In the Eden-like valley of Dehra Doon—set in verdure against the Himalayan lowlands of the United Provinces—the pearly vapours floated upward in the atmosphere and vanished in the morning glimmer. The eastern horizon was stained with a surge of crimson light which expanded and glowed until it became a flood of carmine-coloured resplendence. Then from drifts of scarlet cloud quivered forth the rising sun's first luminant ray ; like a smile from the sky, it shone down upon the flat, parapeted housetop of a zemindar's dwelling ; and beneath the roof burnished by that broadening beam a child was born.

Lying on her bed in an inner chamber of the house, Vanita, the anxious Hindu mother, listened in suspense for the loud, hollow sound of the *sankh*—the triumphant blast which would proclaim the birth of a boy.

Moment after moment went by, and no woman, proud of her task, blew the strong-toned marine shell ; there was no merry music of kettle-drums in front of the dwelling ; no jubilant voices were lifted in words of congratulation—the *sankh* was silent.

With a pang of sorrowful longing, Vanita turned her face to the wall. She knew that Rukmin, her husband, already possessing three sons, desired a fourth son to be born to his house. For Rukmin's sake she deplored having failed to produce the wished-for boy . . . and yet to herself the silence of the *sankh* became suddenly a golden silence as she heard, for the first time, the soft, heart-reaching cry of her new-born baby. In her joy at hearing the child's voice she felt no regret that the cry was the cry of a girl. In the patient mother's ears the sound was like divine music, and it quavered through her heart, and thrilled her with a sweet, new tenderness.

Her mind at once formed for herself an excuse—one she believed would reconcile Rukmin to his disappointment.

‘In possessing three sons to carry on his race, my husband has fulfilled his debt to his ancestors,’ she argued inwardly. ‘When, in the fulness of time, his earthly life comes to a close, there will, with the favour of Providence,

be a son near to perform the last sacrificial rite which lights for a father his way to heaven.' Thus Vanita consoled herself, satisfied that Rukmin could have against her no reproach.

A high-caste woman, Brinda by name, and related to Vanita, entered the room, and, determined to avoid mentioning the fact that the child was a girl, advanced to the bedside and uttered a few words of comfort.

'Rest with your mind at peace,' she said, in mellow Hindustani; 'your babe is as beautiful as the rising sun. Sleep happily, for your youngest born excels in splendour the beauty of your three older sons.'

A tremulous smile flitted across Vanita's lips.

'Full well I know that which you are trying to conceal from me,' she replied: 'for the birth of my baby born this day there will be no exultant blast of the conch, no joyous beating of the drums! . . . Let me look upon my daughter and embrace her. If, in this hour of the silent shell, she be despised by all who have hoped for the birth of a boy, I, having borne her, can but yield her greater love and greater compassion!'

Without a word, Brinda—herself a contented wife and mother, whose children were all prosperously married—placed the infant by the

side of Vanita, whose dark, expectant eyes lit up with love at sight of the little face, with its exquisitely-curved eyebrows and softly-moulded features.

'In fairness she resembles a lotus-bud warmed by the sunlight,' Vanita thought. And in a low yet triumphant voice she said: 'Let my husband know he should rejoice in the possession of his daughter, for he is more blessed by her birth than if a million drums were beating to give welcome to a son!'

Vanita's words were conveyed to Rukmin, and the assurance of his daughter's beauty sweetened the cup of bitterness proffered him by the gods. Outside the dwelling, with his bare brown arms folded across his breast, he was standing near a clump of plantain-trees, the great, ribbed, ribbon-like leaves of which were cool and gleaming with the moisture of the recent night.

At the moment of sunrise he had fronted eastward, and had commenced his religious duties, bowing himself humbly before the up-speeding sun, that he revered as a symbol of the Supreme Deity, as an emblem of the mysterious, beatific power that could be guessed at dimly, but never comprehended; the source of light rising above the earth, and making the universe visible to mortal vision;

the flaming steed that, with pace and course unchanged, traversed the sky each day, overriding, with unapproachable splendour, the night darkness; the celestial fire—the eternal time-marker, that diffused brilliancy and warmth through age upon age—showing ever to the world the same dazzling face, while men in succession faded out, like twinkling clay lamps flickering down with their oil burnt dry.

Now that the self-luminous and earth-brightening orb had mounted above the horizon, Rukmin had ceased to prostrate himself with prayerful humility to the ground.

Seeming taller than he was by nature, on account of the high folds of his white turban, and arrayed in statuesque draperies of fine-fibred linen, he presented a stately appearance, his clear-cut features and calm bearing imparting to him the aspect of inherent dignity which characterizes men of Aryan type.

In silence he had watched the musicians depart with their instruments, for which there was now no call at his door; in silence he had encountered the looks of condolence cast upon him by his neighbours; and, lastly, he had seen walk away with head bent in disappointment his family barber, who, had the *sankh* sounded in those first moments of suspense,

would have gone boastfully to Rukmin's relations to spread the tidings of a boy's birth.

Left to his own reflections, Rukmin gazed towards the resplendent sky, in which the bright-red glow had broken into roseal drifts, which changed to flames behind spreading shafts of sun-gold. He heard the chirruping sound made by a tiny grey squirrel as it darted near his feet on its way to a mango-tree. Then from the tree flew a painted-jay, with plumage of brilliant azure. Rukmin watched the blue-winged bird soar upward in the air, and Vanita's message recurred to his mind. As her words forced themselves home to him, the sombreness departed from his eyes and gave place to an expression of mild contentment.

'The mother of my sons has spoken wisely,' he reasoned within himself. 'With this daughter may have come an added blessing to my hearth. Since Vanita has welcomed to her breast this girl-child, I will with gladness receive her to my heart.'

He unfolded his arms and stretched them forth in the direction of the glorious sun that was ascending amid the expanding sheen of firmament-gold; then, as he turned to enter his house, his glance wandered towards his crops of growing grain and to his well-fed cows

browsing with their calves on a strip of pasture-land, while a constant clink was made by the cattle-bells fastened round their necks with strings of blue-glass beads intermixed with cowries. It seemed to him that an air of new prosperity hung over his cattle and his crops; the fields of corn appeared richer, with promise of a heavy harvest; and the cows looked as though they would give more than their usual daily measures of milk.

‘Certainly, a luck-bringer has come to me,’ he thought. ‘In former seasons my fields never showed indications of so plenteous a harvest as at the rising of this day’s sun.’

He went within the house to look upon his daughter, and greatly pleased at sight of her beauty, he placed in each of her hands, for luck, a golden coin, and hung round her neck a string of amethysts, from which depended an amulet of carved coral.

‘Grow up as full of virtues as you are full of beauty,’ he said, with the rich cadence of Hindustani. ‘Resemble in your good qualities a sparkling ruby set with many pearls.’

* * * * *

It seemed that his wish was to be realized. As the years passed, the child displayed a grace of disposition equal to the charm of her form and features. Her name—Astā—was

went to fall like a caress from the lips of Rukmin, who entertained a superstitious belief that the good fortune which had overtaken him after her birth was due to her presence.

Since her advent his mind had not been harassed by a care. His sons developed strength and fearlessness; his wife was frugal and faithful; his tenants paid regularly for the use of his lands and tenements; his herdsmen and his tillers laboured well for their hire; and his cattle remained healthy when other herds were stricken with disease. Often on returning from his fertile fields, when Asta ran to meet him, it pleased him to think that to her he owed his prosperity, and she found favour, at all times, in his sight. To have uttered a reproving word to her would have seemed to him like reproaching a sunbeam for shining on his hearth, or a beautiful flower-bud for unfolding its petals at his threshold.

By the time Asta was in her sixth year she was able to assist Vanita in her household duties, although every culinary task performed by the child was done in play. It was also play to her when, at that tender age, she was instructed in the first religious rite which was to prepare her for a peaceful domestic life, when she should become a wife. In accordance with a section from the Mahabharata, the great

Sanskrit poem, she was expected to make two small clay images of the god Siva, worshipped as the upholder of the Ganges—the sacred river believed to have a triple flowage running its tides through heaven, earth, and hell.

Brinda, who had a caste claim upon the child, had undertaken to show her how to make the statues. But Asta, with the lump of moist clay in her hands, and finding it could be shaped to any object, disregarded the instructions she had received, and applied her energies to the moulding of diminutive dishes and cooking-pots.

‘Desist your play, child, and do as I have instructed you!’ Brinda exclaimed, seizing the clay, and making it again into a shapeless lump.

‘You will anger the gods!’

Asta’s sunny face dimpled with smiles.

‘No gods are near to be angered, since none have I made,’ she replied.

Taking the flexible clay, she commenced a fresh design, but it was some time before she was prevailed upon to mould two representations of Siva. In compliance with further instruction, she placed the clay figures on a wood-apple rind surrounded by leaves, and after purifying her body with cold water poured over her head from a small brass vessel, she attired herself in clean apparel, and placed an

offering of bael-leaves and marigolds near the images, the heads of which she afterwards sprinkled with holy water. With her little soft hands clasped, and her pretty head bent, she lisped out the prayers that were dictated to her by Brinda. Comprehending nothing of their meaning, Asta merely repeated, tone for tone, the words as they fell upon her ears.

When she had become an expert at performing this preparatory rite, she was taught to follow the example set forth in a second lesson from the ancient epochal poem. After completing her arrangements with minuteness—although scarcely with reverence—she bathed and invested herself with fresh raiment. Then, carrying some flowers to a brass plate in which, with white sandal-paste, she had painted a semblance of the feet of Krishna, she recited the sentences she had already learned by heart—words which, falling from her childish lips, were full of pathos :

‘May I have for my husband a prince of righteousness. May I be trustworthy and beautiful, and become the mother of wise and good sons. May my granary receive continually all it can contain of bread-corn, and may my farmyard be stocked perpetually with milch-cows. When I die, may every relation who is near and dear to me enjoy life and good

fortune. . . . And may I draw my last breath on the banks of the sacred River Ganges, and from thence enter heaven and have everlasting life.'

Asa was an apt pupil, and, later on, there was no difficulty in instructing her in another religious rudiment—a ceremony for which she was taught to paint on the floor, with rice-paste, the likeness of ten gods and deified men, and to make an offering of sandal-paste and freshly-gathered flowers.

At the age of seven, she took a delight in tracing on the floor the many symbols of her future prosperity—foremost among the signs being the River Ganges dotted over with boats; a house surrounded by a garden; a palanquin with a man and a woman seated within, and the sun and the moon appearing above; a blossom-laden branch of a tree; a granary; a farmyard; and a temple. Having depicted these emblematical objects, she prayed to be allowed to possess the happiness they portrayed; and petitioned that, in her married life, no rival might cast an evil shadow in her path and rob her of her husband's love.

There were times when she was thrown on her own resources for amusement during the long, hot hours of the day, while Vanita was occupied with domestic duties. On these occa-

sions Asta would embellish portions both of the interior and exterior of the house by drawing quaint devices on the walls as far up as her small arms could reach—pictures which were creations of her own imagination and yet bore the impress of her everyday surroundings.

One balmy afternoon, while Vanita was busy in the dairy, Asta provided herself with some crudely-coloured pastes with which to paint on the walls her favourite subjects. The rythmical sound of the churning-sticks and the occasional clink of metal vessels came, drowsily, from the dairy, where Vanita, with the aid of her dairymaids, was employed in making butter which was afterwards to be converted into ghee. To the monotonous accompaniment produced by the churning-sticks, Asta repeated, from force of habit, one of the prayers culled from the Mahabharata—the prayer which she thought applied solely to herself, her three brothers, and her mother, and which she uttered in a style between air and recitation:—‘May my mother be like Shasthi, whose children all lived. May my mother be like Pritha, whose three sons were renowned for their courage, strength, and heroism. May my mother resemble the sacred waters of the Ganges, which can quench all thirst; and may she possess the excellence of the Mother-Earth, whose

patience can never be exhausted. . . . May I strive to deserve the same blessings, and by my own industry and obedience become worthy of great commendation.'

The child's prayer ceased, and the rhythmus of the churning-sticks seemed to set her heart a-tune. Her dimpled feet began to move to the measure of sound, and, leaving her painting-pastes, she picked up a basket made of green leaves and bamboo-twigs, and filled it with feathery-gold babul-bloom, which had fallen from a tree that shaded her own little flower-bed. Carrying the fragrant freight to the doorway, she scattered the blooms until they resembled a mat as soft as down beneath her small bare feet.

'My father will rejoice when he sees this pretty carpet,' she mused; 'he will say, "You have done well!"'

She gathered up a second basketful of the blossoms, with which she completed her decorations, and then stood on the mat of downy blooms, and watched for Rukmin to return from surveying his lands. Directly he came in sight she ran towards him, exclaiming:

'Look! I have made your threshold fair for your coming! Are you pleased with me for spreading so soft a carpet for your feet?'

'For a certainty,' he answered. 'With you

I am always well-pleased, little child of the dawn.'

'Call me not child of the dawn, else I might be wafted wherewither the dawn goes at each sunrise, returning not till the day and the night are passed. I am none but Rukmin's and Vanita's child!'

He smiled down at her eager face.

'That being so, what more are you, little one?'

'The luck-bringer! the luck-bringer!' she exclaimed, clapping her hands with merriment.

'Decidedly, you are the forerunner of prosperity,' he agreed. 'But there are numerous other virtues——'

'What are virtues?' she interrupted. 'I pray the gods to give me virtues knowing not what virtues are or whence they come. I wish that they were pearls!'

'They are pearls beyond price,' he replied.

'Pearls? Pearls?' she echoed, jumping round him with joy. She looked at him first with wondering delight, then with disappointment. 'I have them not!—they have not come!' she exclaimed regretfully, 'otherwise I should see them.'

'We do not see everything that we ourselves possess,' he said, stroking her satiny cheek. 'Yet I perceive clearly the pearls of purity

which surround my daughter's brow and gird her breast.'

Marvelling, Asta raised her hands to her forehead to feel for the diadem. Then she glanced down at the amethyst and coral amulets on her chest. Neither by sight nor touch could she discern the coveted pearls.

'I know!' she exclaimed, with sudden inspiration, 'the gods have put them inside!'

Rukmin smiled.

'Possibly—that you may always keep them,' he said.

'Indeed, I can never lose them,' she replied with satisfaction, clasping her little hands over her chest. And she believed that the pearls were there, hidden from her sight.

With each successive year, Rukmin had cherished Asta with greater fondness, taking pride in her increasing beauty and sweetness of character. He entertained pity for his younger brother Raudra, whose daughter Kameena—born within an hour of Asta's birth—was plain of feature, and dull of disposition. And Raudra possessed but one son, a weakly lad, named Gondal, who passed his time in receiving instruction from a guru—an old man well versed in the Vedas—who encouraged the boy in his love of learning and disinclination to take part in any kind of sport.

Rukmin thought with pride of his own strong-limbed, healthy sons, and he delighted in the beauty of his little daughter. The fame of Asta's fairness had spread through many villages, and during seasons of festivity offerings of candied fruits, cooked daintily by the wives of his brother caste-men, were presented at his door for her. And sometimes there would come a basket made of leaves, filled with almonds and raisins, or with ripe custard-apples.

As Rukmin walked with her over the scented babul bloom he realized how precious she was to him, and how greatly she contributed to the contentment of his life. Within his palm her soft hand fluttered like a little bird nestling, and while her dimpled feet stepped near his own he felt at peace with all that was of earth and all that was of heaven.

'Come!' Asta called playfully to a peacock that was perched on the branch of a tree.

In answer to her call there was a heavy sweep as the bird cleft the air and alighted near the child on the ground.

'Always this beautiful bird comes at my command,' she said, stroking its sapphire neck. 'For many hours of the day he is my play-fellow. But his voice is not sweet. Do you think it could be improved by honey or ghee?'

‘In no degree whatever,’ Rukmin replied, smiling.

‘Yet the screech of a grating well-wheel is softened by the pouring on of oil!’ she retorted with conviction.

‘Even so,’ he responded. ‘The wheel, being made by man, can be attuned by man; but that which is the work of the Great Maker no man can improve.’

‘But with honey—with honey——’

Asta’s persistent voice was drowned in the harsh cry of the peacock as it flew back to the tree.

‘He is offended!’ she exclaimed, her tone tending to tears.

‘Apparently,’ Rukmin said.

‘I meant not that he should be vexed,’ she pouted. ‘I will again summon him down.’ And raising her voice, she called: ‘*A, o—A, o!*’

The peacock gave no indication of winging its way down to her. Preening itself, the gorgeous bird remained perched aloft, its plumage shining with jewel-like brightness between the foliage of the tree. And overcome by childish remorse, not unmixed with childish anger, Asta put her hands up to her eyes and gave vent to a series of tearful wails.

CHAPTER II

• ALMOS

THAT evening, before the mat of mimosa-like blossom had lost a tithe of its gold, a keen-visaged, travel-worn, yet dignified-looking man approached the peaceful habitation. Halting at the entrance, and not perceiving an attendant by whom he could send a message, he announced his arrival by calling aloud :

‘Ho, Sir Zemindar ! Come forth ! A friend is waiting ! He who calls is Hiran, a journeyer from the village of Nilang !’

In response to the unexpected summons, Rukmin went out to greet his visitor.

‘Your presence is welcome,’ Rukmin said, bending his forehead upon his hand in courteous salutation. He then extended his hand as to a brother, and added : ‘You have journeyed a great distance. Rest in comfort, and, at your leisure, I will listen while you tell me of your travels, which I doubt not are full of brave adventures.’

Self-possessed and serenely polite, he re-

frained from expressing surprise at the arrival of his unlooked-for guest, notwithstanding the fact that nine years had elapsed since the two men had seen each other. As though they had parted but yester evening, they sauntered toward the plantain-trees and seated themselves on a couple of couches which were placed conveniently in the sheltered spot.

Having exchanged ceremonious speech with his host, Hiran called for his hookah to be brought to him by one of his attendant men, several of whom were waiting with his horse on the road. When the order had been obeyed, the hireling, in obedience to a wave of his master's hand, returned to his former halting-place.

At a command from Rukmin one of his serving boys brought from the porch a red-earthen vase containing embers, from which, after blowing away the ash with his breath, he selected, by means of a pair of fire-tweezers, some tiny balls of glowing charcoal, which he placed carefully on the spiced tobacco in Hiran's hookah. As soon as the narcotic substance began to burn, it exhaled an aromatic odour, which pervaded the surrounding atmosphere. Having performed a similar task for his master, the boy, taking with him the vase of embers, withdrew and waited at a respectful

distance, near enough to be summoned should his services again be required, and far enough off not to hear his master's voice in ordinary conversation.

Left alone with Rukmin, Hiran explained the reason of his visit, making an earnest proposition, to which for many moments he received no response. It was a proposal on behalf of his eldest son for the hand of Asta, according to the custom by which children were betrothed in marriage, by consent of their parents.

'Myself and my daughter are honoured by your offer,' Rukmin said at length in a constrained manner.

'Your speedy acceptance will be an equal honour to me and my son,' Hiran replied. 'It would be unwise to postpone so urgent a decision. I am compelled to return without unnecessary delay to the border of Tibet, where, in a manner consistent with the dignity of my ancestors, I am carrying on a prosperous trade. But it is time for a wife to be chosen for my son Almos, now arrived at his twelfth year. I desire that he should be allied to the daughter of one who is as my own brother; therefore I have journeyed hither to press your acceptance of my offer. Almos is handsome of countenance and noble of form. In due time he will be invested with the Vaisyas

Sacramental Thread, and, following the instructions of the holy Vedas, he will lead an upright life, and be a credit to the industrial class to which we belong.'

In gloomy silence Rukmin had listened to the recital. Previous to this offer for Asta's hand, he had always thrust from his mind the thought of a day of promise that he knew must come, and he was unwilling to utter the words which would loosen his own claim upon his daughter. Nevertheless, he felt that it would be well for her that he should consent. In addition to being a wealthy trader, Hiran bore a high character, and was greatly respected in the village of his birth. His son, following in his footsteps, would be worthy a bride as fair of face and disposition as Asta was fair.

Still Rukmin hesitated.

'Before I betroth my daughter to your son,' he said, 'I must know his destiny as foretold by our astrologers. If the stars and planets in the horoscope of each do not harmonize in allotment, such a marriage would be ill-chosen, and of a consequence it would be folly to risk.'

'I have come prepared,' Hiran replied.

- Untying a knot in his shoulder-drapery, he produced a document which he outspread before his host.

'The roll of my son's fate is a prosperous

one,' Hiran continued. 'The stellar mansion beneath which he was born insures his good fortune and happiness throughout a long and contented life.'

Rukmin, whose memory retained every item of Asta's horoscope, as though it were written in indelible letters on his mind, saw that the astrologers had marked the same course of events for both. In the two horoscopes the signs of the zodiac agreed. He felt he could raise no reasonable objection to the betrothal. Going within the house, he returned with Asta's horoscopic chart.

Hiran examined the document with eagerness, an expression of gratification settling upon his features as he followed each mark.

'My son and your daughter share the same blissful fate,' he remarked. 'What is to prevent their enjoying so bright a destiny together?'

'Nothing—since the Ruler of the stars and of men's lives has so ordained,' Rukmin replied, with gloomy submission.

'Then the matter can be arranged without further delay,' Hiran said, pleased that his proposition had met with success. 'We will make ourselves ready to place the facts before a priest, who shall draw up the agreement to which we will affix our signatures.'

Rukmin's manner became more grave and dignified, as he replied :

'It is the hour for the revered priest to arrive to perform the devotional ceremony that precedes the evening meal served for myself and my family. Even now he must be approaching.'

As Rukmin finished speaking, he glanced along the road and made a reverential obeisance. Towards the dwelling walked, with brisk pace, a priest, garbed in voluminous vesture, and carrying the bright iron rod of his office. Round his neck hung long rosaries, made of wood and stone brought from shrines to which he had made pilgrimages.

In his wake limped two beggars—one a crippled man, stricken in years, and naked, save for the ragged turban on his head and his threadbare loin-cloth, a few dingy threads of which reached half-way to his wizened knees. His companion was a famished boy, whose covering was still more deficient in amplitude. Girding his loins were a few joined fragments of wear-ravelled string, to which was knotted, back and front, a strip of dust-grimed cotton fabric that was stretched between his bony thighs. Round his head, to protect it from the sun, was wound a torn turban, and its jagged ends framed his face in dingy tatters.

Extending their skeleton-like hands, the

beggars prostrated themselves in supplication before Rukmin.

‘May the lordly one spurn not these starving earth-worms!’ they wailed. ‘May he give food to these miserable slaves, lest they perish eating the dust at his gracious feet!’

It was not an occasion on which to withhold charity. Impelled by a superstitious feeling that if he gave liberally prosperity would attend the marriage project, Rukmin went within his house, and returned, followed by a servant boy carrying two plate-like squares of plantain-leaves piled with parched rice. The dole was transferred to the beseeching hands of the beggars, who received also eight annas from Rukmin. Hiran, too, threw upon the ground a couple of two-anna pieces, which the supplicants picked up with profound gratitude.

‘May the exalted donors be blessed according to the bountifulness they have shown to these breadless wanderers!’ the cripple mumbled, bowing his wrinkled forehead to the earth. ‘Blessings ever be the lot of the merciful bestowers!’

‘Yea,’ the famished boy said, adding his voice to the feeble croak of the old man, ‘may good fortune never be separated from the lords of plenteousness, who have showered alms upon these unworthy slaves! Henceforth

these miserable lives are at the command of the exalted givers! Peace and plenty be with the generous donors! . . . peace and plenty!

Continuing to croak words of thankfulness and humility, the beggars dragged themselves to their feet, and hobbled away, eager to reach the road, where, with their faces screened by the hedge, they could crouch down and devour the rice.

The priest, who had watched the alms-giving, remarked :

‘It is due to each that the poor should ask something of the rich, and that the rich should from their hoard bestow a little upon the poor. He who gives to those who come, destitute, to his door, makes room for a blessing to enter through the space thus created in his store-house.’

‘Maharaj,’ Rukmin said, ‘well would it be for both giver and receiver were this law of mutual benefit borne constantly in mind, inasmuch as both would know themselves to be gainers of good.’

Reverencing the Brahmin as a preceptor and guide, Rukmin explained the urgent proposition which had been made with regard to Asta. In a short time the agreement was written out and signed. The priest then addressed himself to Hiran :

‘Teach your well-favoured son that to be worthy is to be strong. Prevail upon him, in his youth, to remember that “an unstable man, like a chalice composed of clay, is broken easily, and cannot be mended without difficulty; but a righteous man, like a chalice wrought of gold, is broken with difficulty, and repaired with ease.”’

‘Maharaj, I will acquaint my son with the truth so wisely spoken,’ Hiran replied. ‘It will be his pleasure to be governed by your venerable advice.’

Rukmin invited Hiran to stay and share the evening repast—a repast which would consist of delicate pastry, crystallized fruit, spiced milk, and vegetables cooked in clarified butter, each article having been prepared by Vanita, that no one of lower caste might touch the provisions placed before her husband, his sons and his guest. She and Asta, complying with Hindu etiquette, would eat afterwards by themselves. Hiran courteously accepted the invitation.

Having performed his priestly duties, the Brahmin departed, carrying away, in addition to the customary offering of farinaceous food, a liberal gift, in current coin, for the trouble he had taken in drawing up the document relating to the betrothal of Almos and Asta.

When the simple meal, served within the house, was at an end, Rukmin, followed by his sons, once more escorted his guest to the couches near the plantain-trees, where, despite the warmth of the hour, a portable charcoal fire had been placed to give a cheery glow in the moonlight, which had dispelled the brief approach to darkness following upon the setting of the sun. In a contented manner the two men smoked their hookahs, and conversed of the events which had transpired during the years of Hiran's absence.

'It seems a pity you will not prolong your visit to these parts,' Rukmin remarked. • 'There are many friends to give you welcome in the Doon.'

'To linger would be to cause anxiety to those on the borderland, who count upon my return within a limited time,' Hiran replied. 'To-morrow, at daybreak, I shall set forth on a pilgrimage to Hardwar, that, on the following day, I may bathe at the sacred Ghât. Afterwards I shall come back to Dehra Doon, and journey across the hills of Mussoorie, and across the Bhaprati River to Harsil. From thence it will be necessary for me to travel on foot for two days, over ridged ground, until I reach Nilang, the frontier village of Tibet.'

'The way through the passes will be harsh

to your feet, as well as beset with danger from savage beasts,' Rukmin remarked. 'What weapons do you carry ?'

'Merely my staff of hill-grown wood, and my own undaunted heart.'

'Scarcely would they protect you, should you be attacked alone.'

'Man is never alone,' Hiran said, his deep eyes expanding with a profound appreciation of existing mystery. 'Everywhere is the Unrevealed Spirit; and in the vast solitudes the Sublime Power is felt most near. If it be pre-ordained that I shall proceed, without harm, on my journey, no peril will overpower me; but if the Great Ruler has decreed that I shall perish in an unfamiliar path, the deadliest weapon which could be wielded in my defence would be futile against the infinite force of the All-Doer, who, unheard, hears all; unseen, sees all; unguided, guides all.'

Rukmin stirred the smouldering light-ball that was in the bowl of his hookah :

'Truly. Yet it is well you should provide yourself with a stout staff, even as the Great Defender has provided you with a stout heart.'

'You are full of wise warnings for my safe journeying,' Hiran said. 'Nevertheless, I would gladly forget my travels and speak

further of what concerns my son and myself—in that his happiness will give increase to mine.'

A cloud came over Rukmin's brow. It harassed him to reflect that he would soon be compelled to resign Asta to others. He would rather not have been reminded of the errand on which Hiran had come. Asta was still small and dependent; still the beloved and beautiful child who, in the hour of Rukmin's disappointment, had brought him joy. She was so light and frail—so sweet a peace-giver when he held her in his arms. Not willingly could he transfer her into another's house—his luck-bringer whose birth had been heralded by the rosiness of dawn—his flower-faced daughter whose very footfall was like the velvet fall of rose-leaves.

Upon Rukmin's tender thoughts broke the voice of Hiran.

'As soon as circumstances give me favour to make another journey from Nilang, I will with due speed come again into the Doon. My son and his mother will accompany me, and I will time our arrival for the next marriage season. •Sir!' he ejaculated, as he noticed Rukmin's morose expression of countenance, 'wherefore do you not show yourself merry? Did you hope for better than my son?'

Rukmin roused himself, and, with stateliness, said :

‘That could I have not done, since there could be none better than your son for my daughter.’

‘Aptly expressed !’ Hiran exclaimed. ‘The matter is settled.’

‘Beyond a doubt,’ Rukmin responded. ‘To your eldest son belongs the hand of my only daughter.’

Before Hiran took his departure Asta was presented to him, and received a gift of fine crimson cloth, woven from the downy wool of the wild goat of Tibet—a gift with which he had come prepared, and which would have been carried away, unpresented, had his position been rejected. For the important occasion Asta was dressed in a pink silk robe, the fold of which clung, like the closed petals of a rosebud, round her dimpled form. She stood before him and accepted the gift timidly ; but as her gaze encountered his eagle glance, she made a movement as though to retreat. His eyes were gladdened by no more than a glimpse of her perfect little features, for, overcome by shyness, she hid her face in the rosy raiment which veiled her from head to foot.

‘Far have I travelled, little one, to pay you

homage,' he said. 'Have you for me no fairer greeting?'

Asta lowered the pink veil from her eyes and peeped at him over its petal-like edge; then, half timidly, half mischievously, she drew the silken folds over her face, and, turning away from him, ran to an inner apartment, where Vanita, debarred by custom from meeting Rukmin's guest, awaited the child's return.

'With the stranger I wished not to have speech,' Asta exclaimed. 'Has he come to take away my brothers?'

'No, indeed!' Vanita said, folding her arms lovingly around the child.

'Then for what purpose has he come?' Asta asked. 'Why did you dress me in this pretty raiment and bid me go to him?'

'Speedily you will understand, pearl of my heart,' Vanita murmured. 'You are like a dove whose shelter is in my arms, and soon I must send you forth to grace with your gentle presence a distant home. My heart's joy, I dread the day of your flight!'

Asta comprehended nothing of the import of these words. Her face was bright with smiles, and with her small caressing hands she stroked away the tears that were dewing Vanita's long eyelashes.

'I will never stay away from you,' the child said. 'If strangers take me hence, I will still be your dove and fly back to the nest of your heart.'

'Alas, sweet one !' Vanita exclaimed, 'I have always known that you must leave me ; but your love for me need never become less.'

'It never—never will !' Asta responded, nestling against her mother's bosom ; and for the time Vanita was comforted, hoping that the projected marriage would be for the happiness of her little daughter.

Early the next morning Brinda, who overnight had heard of Hiran's visit and of its result, arrived from her husband's house in a palanquin. She greeted Asta joyfully and, uttering many expressions of goodwill, gave her a pretty scent-locket set with a mirror and perfumed with attar-of-roses.

'See, little one,' she said triumphantly, 'in answer to your prayers, this blessing has come to you.'

'And I am glad that the blessing is a scent - locket,' Asta exclaimed, sniffing the perfume while she tried to catch the reflection of her own face in the miniature looking-glass.

Brinda made with her hands a gesture of consternation.

'I did not mean the locket, child,' she exclaimed. 'It was always hard to keep your mind on serious thoughts. And yet you have learned with intelligence the lessons from the Great Poem.'

'And may I wear this pretty gift round my neck?' Asta asked, still toying with her new treasure.

Gratified to witness the delight her present had brought, Brinda fastened the trinket to a silken cord and suspended it round Asta's neck.

'You are but a child,' she exclaimed indulgently. 'Go, sweet one, to your play.'

While Asta divided her attention between her pet parrot and her scent-locket, Vanita and Brinda discussed the arrangements which would have to be made for the marriage-feast, when the time should arrive; and they spoke of lovely garments to be made for the little bride, and sparkling jewels that she would wear.

Vanita, who, at first, had approached the subject with reluctance, became quite animated over the details of decoration, and she was more than reconciled to the coming event before Brinda had taken her departure.

However, force of circumstances overcame force of custom, and for a longer period than Vanita had anticipated she was enabled to

keep with her the child to whom she was so tenderly attached.

Hiran journeyed back in safety to Nilang; but unable to return to Dehra Doon, on account of a frontier disturbance, he carried on a prosperous trade for six years. During his protracted absence he managed to send occasional verbal messages to Rukmin, accompanied by shawls of dark-red *t'erma* for Asta. And sometimes for her would come ornaments of fine metal studded with uncut gems. These messages and gifts were delivered by a brother caste-man who travelled with merchandise from Harsil to the Doon. Each message was to the effect that Almos continued to thrive, and that he was looking forward with pride to the time when he would come to claim his bride.

Then Rukmin received tidings of an unexpected calamity.

In their frontier trading, Hiran and his son had been obliged to take a caravan across the mountainous boundary, and had entered the vast region of the guarded tableland. Suspected of a conspiracy, of which they were wholly innocent, by some Tibetan tribesmen, Hiran, his son, and his caravaneers were seized and made captives, being threatened with instant death should they make an effort to escape. They were unable to hold communication with

their own people, who, instead of organizing a rescue-party from Nilang, were held back by fear of being attacked with the same violence, or of being destroyed on the wild plateau by the terrific storms which tribal demonists said were brought into deadly force by offended and infuriated devils. No clue was found of the men who detained the caravan, and the friends of Hiran and his son had no choice but to leave the unfortunate captives at the mercy of their captors.

The disaster would have caused unmitigated dismay to Rukmin's household but for the prediction of a learned astrologer who, on being consulted and receiving a liberal fee, foretold the release of Almos and his triumphant entry into the Doon.

Brinda wept when she heard of the unfortunate news which had been brought from Nilang, for she had not been easy in her mind during the long absence of Almos. She was now in a state verging on despair, since the first ceremony of marriage between himself and Asta should already have taken place, and the young girl was at an age for the final wedding-rites to be performed.

All Brinda could do in the matter was to bestow upon Asta an amulet which was supposed to protect its wearer from misfortune.

This Brinda did, at the same time advising Asta to be righteous in all her thoughts and actions, and to repeat dutifully her daily prayers.

Sharing the astrologer's assuredness that events would right themselves, Rukmin was not sorry the wedding was postponed, since the circumstance would enable him to keep Asta for a longer period beneath his roof.

But when, in spite of the astrologer's prediction, two years rolled by without bringing tidings of Almos, Rukmin grew anxious on his daughter's account. She was in her sixteenth year, and he knew it would be a heart-galling fate for her should she remain unwedded, waiting for a bridegroom who, in captivity, might become an old man before he was liberated and could arrive to fulfil the marriage contract. Her beauty and her gentleness would bring no joy to her if during her youthfulness she could not wear the badge of wifedom—the slender, iron bangle, the absence of which would be a disgrace too bitter to be supported.

Asta, too, began to wonder how she would fare if Almos failed to return. She had been trained to look forward to a happy future with him, and it had seemed that through him would be fulfilled all the prayers of her childhood. Now the years were passing . . . passing. . . . And, during what were heralded as

the waking months of the god Vishnu, the wedding-music sounded ceaselessly from plain to plain, and while other girls, bride-apparelled, jewel-crowned, and decked with flowers, were going to their marriage-feasts, while the red rice was being scattered, and the *alta*-crimsoned water was being sprinkled amid the roar of marine shells, Asta was filled with an unspeakable sorrow lest the silent trumpet and the silent drum might always be her portion—lest, without having been a bride, she might eventually stand no less forlorn than many a hapless wife who had had the misfortune to survive her husband; more shamed than many a wretched woman who, under the ban of widowhood, was doomed to absolute abjectness, body and spirit subdued by bitter fasting, heart and soul crushed beneath the grinding yoke of self-subjugation.

Asta knew that recently, in imitation of days when self-immolation by fire was a common practice among widows, there had been isolated cases of secret sutteeism. She recalled one instance in which she had been acquainted with the suttee—a childless woman named Ruthnee, whose husband had died from the bite of a cobra, leaving her unendowed.

In the first appalling moments of Ruthnee's bereavement the bangle of burnished iron—

the visible sign that the wearer possessed a living husband—had been removed from her wrist. And in renouncing the iron wrist-ring—for its significance more valued by Ruthnee than the most precious jewel—she had felt as one accused, a woman whose shadow was to be avoided as though she possessed a malignant power to cast evil in the path from which her substance would intercept the light.

With the glow of passionate youth in her breast, and dreading an existence of pitiless privation, Ruthnee had defied modern law, and believing that by her self-immolation she would be reunited spiritually to her husband, had rushed with frantic resolution to his blazing pyre.

The awful roar and the bursting heat of the flames had not daunted her; terror had not restrained her. From the grasp of men officiating at the pyral fire, who would have dragged her back, she broke, wildly exclaiming:

‘Pure gold fears not the fire, nor is woman’s virtue affrighted by the blaze! For as pure gold emerges brighter from the furnace, woman’s virtue rises glorified from the flame!’

Like a live spark from an extinct fire, had flashed to light Ruthnee’s inherited faith, nerving her to choose the swift, living flames of death rather than the chill, dead mockery of life; a few moments of supreme, grief-

consuming agony, rather than protracting years of tormenting endurance.

It had seemed to Ruthnee that the blaze would perform the office of liberator, not of destroyer; that the flames would set free the imperishable part of herself, enabling her spiritual element to rise triumphantly from her body. With unflinching martyrdom she had mounted the pyre, and had stretched out her arms with a cry to the fire-god:

‘O mighty Agni! god of all the fires! let thy flame and thy brightness kindle my spirit, and convey it to the world of the righteous!’

Then she had flung herself upon her husband’s body, and the roaring flames had at once enwrapped her, devouring her vesture, so that the burning, blinding vapour alone garmented her, and she appeared as part of the devastating fire. •

Her agony and her distractedness were excruciating. Hearing her frenzied screams, and witnessing her instinctive struggles as her flesh was being burnt from her bones, her horrible, sightless efforts to crawl, too late, out of the consuming blaze, the men who at first had tried to keep her from her purpose threw over her an inflammable mat soaked in oil, and held her down with iron rods, that her suffering might sooner cease in death.

So had burned together the lifeless and the living. To the woman destitute of a husband, childless, and possessing no fortune, death in so awful a form had seemed more welcome than life, and of her own accord Ruthnee had sought this fiery end.

Asta had heard the tragedy recounted frequently, and it had impressed her the more in that she had known Ruthnee.

Although several months had elapsed since the occurrence, Asta could not recall the details without a sense of shock, and lately this feeling had become intensified, for she realized acutely that she herself was threatened with a dismay scarcely less overpowering than that which had driven Ruthnee to her final act of desperation.

Asta's soul sickened as she contemplated her future, which, like a black night, loomed with neither star-gleam nor moon-ray to relieve the gloom. The time was not remote when the mothers and children she encountered would shrink back at her approach, assured that the touch of her hand, bearing not the iron bangle, would mark them for misfortune, when the greater portion of her days would be devoted to fasting and penance. For, despite a modern act dealing more leniently with husbandless women, racial tradition

and racial superstition held indomitable sway, binding to ancient custom those allied to the Brahman's rigorous system of worship.

Already Asta's old instructress, Brinda, although she uttered no reproach, began to look askance at her former pupil.

In her passionate sorrow Asta prayed that Almos might come, or that she might die before there should arrive the terrible hour in which she would cower abased to the earth—the hour in which, stripped of her many bracelets, she would be denounced as one who could never wear the iron wrist ring.

'How deep will be my misery!' she moaned in her anguish; 'how terrible will be my shame—my degradation!'

And then she renewed her piteous prayers, and made her flowery offerings to the gods, beseeching them to release Almos from his bondage, and to direct him to her, that she might be saved from everlasting humiliation.

CHAPTER III

ON THE HIGH ROAD

It was the time of the January festival—the period during which, the harvest of the preceding year being reaped, the cultivators belonging to the Brahminic community rested for a few days from their labour, in order to express the thankfulness that famine had been averted, and a heavy harvest gathered in.

Throughout the foregoing months the field-toilers had watched and tended their crops as patiently as a devoted mother watches and tends her growing children. In the early weeks after the sowing, there had been a prolonged drought, and notwithstanding all attempts at irrigation, it had seemed improbable that the parched earth could yield profitable crops.

By day the sun had blazed down, drying the streams, by night the hot, oppressive atmosphere had emitted no moisture, and at each arid dawn the husbandmen, with thirsty throats and heat-cracked skins, had renewed the daily

work of hoeing, and women and children had helped in the task of weeding, for even under circumstances which rendered difficult the cultivation of food-grain, the jungle-plants natural to the soil grew up in abundance from the earth.

Then had come rain, which, in its abnormal duration, had brought from the mountains surging torrents that flooded every stream and made the fields sodden. After wading into the mire to do all that could be done to protect the crops, many a tiller, on returning from toil, had seen his mud-hut, with its roof of bamboo-pole and thatch, washed into a shapeless mass. The families thus rendered homeless had carried in bundles on their heads the rain-soaked bedding and other household goods rescued from the mud-heaps, and had sought refuge with more fortunate neighbours in the swamped villages.

At the termination of these months of rain the atmosphere had become hot and dense, with the dampness of earth-exhaled steam, and each day some of the cultivators had returned, agued, from their work, with the poison of the swamp in their blood and the grip of fever in their bones.

After this sultry, sickness-spreading spell, the heat-mists had vanished, the rank effluvium had gone from the vegetation, the landsprings had

dried up, and the climate had become temperate. Bathed in brilliant sunshine, the broad fields and deep avenues of Dehra Doon had burst into renewed beauty, and once more the valley was embowered in an Eden-like florescence. In due season the harvesters, satisfied with the result of their labour, had gathered in the ripe fruits of the earth; and now, exulting in the success achieved throughout the past year, the husbandmen were making the valley resound with their ancient songs of praise :

‘With sunshine and with rain has the plougher been blessed ! With verdure-breathing wind has the sower been recompensed ! With fair weather and with copious crops has the reaper been rewarded ! Therefore will these servants of the soil show their thankfulness by preparing a festival of bread made from the food-grain of the fields. Of the feast will these thankful ones partake in gladness, and with uplifted voices rejoice in the year’s prosperity !’

This was the universal chant of the harvesters as they put aside their ploughshares, their sickles, and their hoes, while the women who had benefited by the heavy harvest joined in the public expression of gladness.

From every direction came, above the clash of cymbals, the sound of the trumpets and the

drums, the incessant throb of the *tambur*, accompanied by the penetrating blast of the *singa*. In every direction vibrated the echoing shouts of harvest-praise, and the roads were gay with raiment freshly dyed to various hues of vermilion, indigo, and saffron, worn by men, women, and children, who journeyed on foot, or in available vehicles, to feast with relatives in distant villages.

Vanita excelled in making almond-bread, whipped-cream pastry, and all kinds of small cakes, flavoured with dried grapes, nuts, and aromatic herbs. A favourite form of sweetmeat for the festival consisted of a primeval preparation of rice-flour, cocoanut, treacle, and gingelly-seeds, these ingredients being rolled into balls and fried in mustard-oil. There were several other spicy confections which, when created by Vanita, were exceptionally tempting, and on this particular occasion sweet-making with her had become a fine art.

During the first day of the festival, Rukmin's relations had visited him with gifts of silk and farina. Before departing, in the evening, his guests had feasted and made merry beneath his roof, while musicians had played in his porch ; and later, outside, there had been an illumination of coloured fire and sky-rockets, provided at his expense.

On the second day of festivity it was a matter of etiquette for Rukmin and his family to return the visits, making offerings of the same description as those he had accepted.

Asta was delighted at the prospect, and Vanita contemplated with scarcely less eagerness the pleasurable outing.

Desiring to set forth in advance of his wife and daughter, in order to present his gifts as early as possible, Rukmin departed on horseback, leaving Vanita and Asta to follow in a *rath*, a picturesque carriage having a dome-shaped canopy of purple velvet embroidered with floss-silk, and curtains decorated with metalline fringe. The conveyance was drawn by a pair of white bullocks, the up-standing, level horns of which were sheathed in amber silk. Folds of amber muslin were crossed on the foreheads of the animals, bright cloths covered their backs, and round their necks jingled bells on tinselled trappings.

Superstitiously avoiding a wretched-looking, bangleless woman in shroud-like drapery, who stood near the *rath*, on the roadway, Asta followed Vanita from the house, and placed herself in an easy position on the cushions enclosed by the velvet curtains.

In brilliancy of attire Asta resembled a rose-carnation. Her bright-pink *sari* was composed

of a broad, straight piece of silver-embossed silk, eighteen yards in length, half of which was draped, petticoat-wise, over her hips, from whence it fell in clinging folds to her bare feet ; the other portion covered the upper part of her soft, slim body, and formed a veil for her head. The dress—the perfection of ease, as well as the perfection of modesty—was of the primitive Oriental fashion which, among Hindu women, had remained unchanged through thousand upon thousand of years, and it formed a robe of grace for Asta's youthful beauty.

She had decked herself in all her jewels, and her delicately oval face was framed in silver ornaments encrusted with amethysts, corals, turquoises, garnets, and topazes, many of the pendants dropping so as to fringe her forehead and gem her arched eyebrows. Her dark, luxuriant hair, shot along its coils with bronze, was drawn smoothly from her brow, and was wound in fragrant rings at the back of her head. The curved lines of her eyelashes had their length accentuated by a thin tracery of *kajal*, and the edges of her slender feet—to which any kind of shoes would have been contaminative—were rose-tinted with *alta*. Round her waist, and falling to her hips, was a chain-belt of eight silver strings studded with sapphires, and attached in front to a moon-

shaped tablet, the lowest string being fringed with twenty-five tiny silver bells, that made a tinkling melody as she moved. It was an ornament of great antiquity, and each bell was finely chased and set with a precious stone, supposed to possess an individual charm for its owner.

Vanita—from whom Asta had inherited much of her beauty—was attired with still greater lavishness. Her gala robe of crimson Benares-cloth was embroidered heavily with thread of gold, and where the shoulder-folds parted there were glimpses of a rich silk bodice, lustrous with changeful, undulating shades of saffron and mauve. A variety of precious stones studded the pendulous ornaments clustering about her throat and brow; and the numerous bangles and white-metal bands, reaching from her wrists to her shoulders, covered her arms as with sleeves of mail. Over her feet fell silver anklets, from which depended flexible silver tassels and lace of finest filigree.

Five ill-clad guardsmen, on foot, and armed with brass-bound cudgels, accompanied the velvet-canopied carriage, to protect it against an attack from thieves—a necessary precaution on account of the jewels worn by Vanita and her daughter.

Urged by the driver, the white bullocks moved forward at a trot, the metallic ring of their bells making a musical chime as the cart went along the smooth road.

To Asta, who seldom had an opportunity to make an excursion of the kind, the sound and the motion were exhilarating; and the calamitous foreboding which had, for months past, weighed at her heart was overcome by the pervasive joyousness of the day.

Parting the curtains, she lifted her face to the sunlight, and drew through her lips a long, sweet breath of fragrant air—the fresh, cool air that she loved to feel fanning her cheeks and playing on her brow. She gazed up at the azure sky, and saw it radiant with light; she looked down at the pasture-land, and beheld it refulgent with young green growth; she directed her glance mountainwards, and observed the same splendour on their misty-blue undulations, the crests of which were flecked with winter snow. And the sunshine that reflected brightness on earth and sky irradiated her spirit, and revealed to her outward and inward vision the world's abounding gladness.

Once more she felt buoyant and free from care, as in the days before the shadow of the Bangleless Hand had rested upon her. Once

more her soft, brilliant eyes sparkled with the joy of life—the joyousness of living; and her lips curved with delight, as though she had quaffed some subtle nectar.

She encountered the wistful gaze of a little, poorly-clad, dusky-complexioned girl who was crouching on the roadside, with a basket of limestones on her lap. The child's dark eyes were full of unconscious pathos, for she had spent the whole of the three previous days in toiling on the dry channel of the River Rispana in search of limestones, that she might sell them, and, with the pittance she received, buy a few festal cakes to share with her mother, who was lying ill in one of the thatched-roof mud-huts which had been erected on a barren eminence of the river-bed.

During periods of tremendous cloud-burst, the Rispana took its tide from a mountain-torrent that in its rapid descent swept down from unexplored heights crashing boulders and carried them in its course. At other seasons, the river-bed was an arid waste on which, at night, wailing jackals prowled for carrion, and occasionally a hyena uttered a solitary nocturnal howl.

The rugged channel yielded large water-worn stones, cartloads of which were borne away daily for building purposes, or to be

hammered until they were reduced to gravel for the mendment of the roads. Now and then a wandering lithologist would discover among the pebbles a rough gem ; but such a treasure never fell to the possession of the boulder-breakers, who, in their ignorance, would have passed it by. And there were the sparse limestones which added to the grey river-bed the smoke from the lime-kiln when the lime-burners were at work.

In its state of aridness, the channel, rutted with numberless wheel-tracks and foot-ways, presented a scene of constant traffic ; and on the shingly waste lived little Lalri—the child who was sitting on the roadside with her limestones on her lap. Her father was a wood-cutter, and had gone with her brothers and other woodcutters to the interior of the hills for timber, and would not return for several weeks.

As she caught sight of Asta's face, Lalri sprang up, grasping her basket of limestones, and ran along at the side of the conveyance.

'Will the lady buy the limestones?' she asked pleadingly.

Two of the guardsmen flourished their clubs and drove her back.

'Get away!' they shouted. 'This is no market for river-stones.'

'But who will buy them?' Lalri exclaimed, with a piteous quaver in her voice. 'My mother is too ill to come with me, and I want *paisa*, that I may prepare for her a tiny feast.'

'Ahah!' the men jeered. 'The feast will be of stones if the basket contains no substance more savoury!'

But having received a sign from Asta, Lalri ran close to the conveyance, the ends of her ragged body-covering dragging in the dust.

'Lady, will you buy the limestones?' she asked pathetically.

'What price are they?' Asta inquired, holding the curtains together so that only a portion of her face was visible.

'*Do paisa*,' the child said, naming a sum equivalent to two farthings.

'That is too high a price for a few common river-stones,' Asta replied.

Lalri gazed at her wistfully.

'They are limestones, and all of good quality,' she said, 'and it took me three days to find them.'

'Probably you were a slow searcher.'

'No, lady,' Lalri said; 'the limestones are far away from each other, and hidden out of sight. If every pebble on the river-bed could be a limestone, picking them up would be pleasant toil.'

'It would not be toil at all, I should say,' Asta remarked. 'I will give you half the amount you have demanded for that basketful.'

Lalri's face lit up with delight. For three days she had laboured with pain and fatigue of body for the limestones, her little back bent and aching cruelly; and on this third day it had seemed that she could not sell the product of her toil. And the festival-sweets which were being sold in the by-ways looked so delicious! and she and her mother had tasted nothing but water and coarse, unleavened bread for fifteen days. •

'I will sell them for *ek paisa*!' Lalri cried, holding out the basket, which was a heavy weight for her slender arms. Almost breathless with excitement, she ran along by the conveyance, while in her eagerness she kept repeating: '*Ek paisa! ek paisa!*' (One farthing).

'Very well,' Asta said, 'I will pay for them at that rate.'

From a small bronze receptacle attached to her girdle, she took a coin of the value of a farthing, and threw it to Lalri.

'That is for the limestones—which you can keep and sell another day. And this,' Asta added, throwing a four-anna piece, 'is for your labour.'

Lalri picked up the money delightedly.

'The lady has bestowed a good gift,' she exclaimed, 'and in return this poor limestone-gatherer gives great gratitude. May the lady always be happy!'

Vanita had been rather alarmed at Asta's liberality, and was inclined to consider it an act of extravagance.

'Not many, like you, give more generously than they buy,' she remarked in a tone of mild rebuke.

'I consider I made an excellent bargain,' Asta replied gaily. 'If I had taken seventeen basketfuls of limestones, for which I should have had no use, in return for the money, they would not have been so rich a purchase as the shining look I had from the little toiler when she uttered her thanks.'

'It is well you carry a small purse,' Vanita responded, 'and that it is not over full.'

Asta's eyes grew very soft as she said :

'But the child had worked for three days on the river-bed, and she wanted to make a feast for her sick mother.'

Vanita patted Asta's hand.

'You did right, pearl. I do not envy the little one the possession of the gift, for which, if necessary, we can perform some trifling act of self-denial.'

Asta looked out again between the purple

curtains. The little limestone-gatherer was going in the direction of the river-bed as quickly as she could walk, with the loaded basket balanced on her head. Burdened as she was, and hindered by her trailing rags, Lalri moved with a swinging, joyous gait, for now, with the *bakhshish*, she could not only procure sweets, but fresh vegetables and spices, which she could cook for the feast; and the brass drinking-vessel would be filled with milk instead of water, since the dwellers on the river-bed could buy food cheaply.

As Lalri vanished from sight, Asta smiled tenderly to herself, thinking she had made one little heart happy on this day of feast.

A woman belonging to the gardener sect, and carrying a baby astride her hip, was passing the conveyance on her way to join some festive circle. Acting on an impulse, Asta threw a chaplet of sandal-scented marigolds to the baby, who, with his fingers twined in the petals, was prompted by his mother to raise his hand in a salaam.

Pleased that her boy had attracted notice, the *malin* stepped nearer to the carriage.

“Joy be with the zemindar’s daughter!” she said, recognizing Asta. “May each rose bloom again for the lady in the fair looks of her own sons, and be like a garland round her heart!”

With a thrill of gratification Asta acknowledged the salutation, and as the conveyance moved quickly on, the woman's parting "*Roz ba'aish !*" (May the day be pleasant !) echoed softly in the ears of Rukmin's daughter.

For the time Asta had forgotten that, like one under a curse, she might soon be denied even the smile of a child. The earth with its infiniteness of life, and day with its magnitude of light, seemed to banish grief, and to exclude every cloud from the present golden hour. On all who were young the bloom of youth was intensified; in all that was sweet there was an added sweetness; everything bright became brighter; and the luminousness encompassed Asta until she felt her heart uplifted as on wings of joy.

'*Roz ba'aish !*'

She smiled as she repeated to herself the words. Verily, the day was fair, and life was awakening all the world with happy laughter.

The bullock-bells jingled merrily as the conveyance reached the high road, the tall hedges of which were wreathed regally with an inflorescence of purple, crimson, and gold. Above the hedges towered wide-branched trees, festooned with blossomy creepers and the gigantic grass plumes of bamboo, stirred

with a silken sound in the scented breeze. During no previous festal-tide had Asta seen the broad roadway look so royally flowerful. On both sides pointing leaves of vivid scarlet poinsettia were emblazoned against orange-tawny showers of trailing bignonia, and amid great fountain-like sprays of bronze-red and ruddy-violet bogonvilla the brilliant-flowered hibiscus set a thousand crimson stars. The vista was one of gorgeous foliage and flowerage, extending further than her gaze could penetrate, the resplendent poinsettia leaves flaring like blood-red flambeaux far into the haze of distance. Skirting one side of the road, where the trees threw a refreshing shade, ran a small canal of crystal-clear water, that coursed with a sweet sound over the grey boulders.

Fatigued by the entertainment of the previous day, Vanita had settled herself in a restful attitude, with her eyes closed, leaving Asta to amuse herself by watching the constant flow of life along the road.

Travelling at an easy pace, the *rath* overtook a procession formed of tillers of the field carrying banners and decorated staves. To the unchanging accompaniment of primitive musical instruments the little band of cultivators chanted a rhythmical chorus while they made their way to a sacred stream of water

in which to purify their bodies, that their spirits might be cleansed of sin.

With the chant of the agriculturists and the trill of their flute-toned pipes mingled the sharp, military sound of a bugle march, as a battalion of Goorkah soldiers, in marching order, approached with heavy-booted tramp. They were a vigorous army of men—alert, cheerful, sturdy, and servicably equipped—on their way to a camp of exercise. The battalion was under the command of English officers in dust-coloured uniforms, bare-kneed and helmeted, their sun-burnt complexions gaining in fairness of appearance by contrast with the swarthiness of the tough-skinned hillmen.

Actuated by a sense of propriety, Asta drew herself back, and pulled the velvet curtains together, that her face could not be seen by the officers or by the Goorkahs. But there was still a crevice through which she could peep, and she was sorry when the long line of infantrymen, walking two abreast, passed by, and the tramp of their booted feet and the sound of their bugles went beyond her hearing.

She was next interested in the houses she knew were occupied by English families—large white-walled houses with deep verandas and neatly clipped boundary hedges. It appeared

to her that the lords of the East and the West loved roses, since the gardens were adorned with a profusion of roses of rare culture. Violets, too, were evidently loved by the English people, for where the great palms threw shadows the sides of the pathways were purpled with the modest little flowers, and their fragrance came out upon the road.

Asta thought, with preference, of her own little flower-patch at the side of her father's house, where the white trumpet-flowers of the datura exhaled their powerful scent, and the flaring marigolds reflected golden fire from the face of the noonday sun. The *Sahib-log* might cherish the violets growing low upon the earth; but, in Asta's opinion, no flower could surpass in splendour the sun-coloured marigold favoured by the gods—the beloved genda that bloomed, untended, in every kind of weather—at every season of year—in what soil soever the seed dropped.

A group of English children, walking along the road with their ayahs and bearers, next attracted her attention.

Then, unattended, on horseback, passed, at a walking pace, a state-prisoner—an exile potentate from Cabul, his features expressive of calm and courageous resignation, his steadfast eyes gazing in the direction of the silent cemetery

hidden from view near the swell of the mountains.

Perhaps, with his mental vision, he saw the alien burial-ground wherein reposed the alabaster tombs in which lay the wife who had shared the first year of his exile and the child he had loved. Perchance, with further penetration, the eyes of his mind looked on the distant land over which he, as a ruler, had failed in power—Cabul, the Land of the Palace of Kings—the rugged region with city, mountain and desert, making it one of the world's wonderlands.

Solitary, impassive, immutable, claiming not brotherhood with the races of India or the race of England, he rode slowly onward.

Asta's glance next fell on a religious mendicant—a begging Brahmin, bareheaded, barefooted, and wearing scanty ochre-red drapery. Rosaries, formed of beads carved from sacred wood, hung round his neck, and in his arms he carried a large, flat basket, covered with a *gerua* cloth, in which to collect rice and flour for distribution among the poor.

Past him came the gleam of swift white-metal wheels, as a party of English cyclists flashed by, the foremost rider being a fragile young girl with a form so light in motion that she seemed to fly, fairy-like, through the air.

Then a mail-tonga, with galloping ponies and clanking harness, rattled by, leaving in its wake a trailing cloud of dust, through which walked a Siva mendicant—a *Tri-Dandi*—carrying as his symbol three slender staves, typical of his command over thought, word, and action.

At the side of the road, where the water flowed in its narrow channel, half a dozen village women, clothed in bright-bordered raiment, with coloured glass bangles tinkling on their shapely brown arms, were squatting on the ground, polishing their round brass water-jars with wet earth and leaves; other daughters of the East were filling at the canal the shining vessels which were to be carried away balanced on ring-pads placed on the women's heads. In this manner, some of the ball-shaped jars were soon poised in tiers of three, while the women, seeming to scarcely feel the burden, stood erect, discoursing among themselves before returning to their homes.

A short distance from the women, a party of Oriental children were at play near the water-course, some flying kites of mauve and yellow paper; others throwing spent blooms of *bougainvillea* into the stream, to watch them dance out of sight over the boulders. Further along the canal, a couple of youths of servile caste, stripped of all but their loin-cloths, were

cleansing their additional body-covering by beating it upon wet stones, and spreading it on the ground to dry.

On the other side of the low wall, which, fringed with orange-gold creeper, skirted the road, a seven-year-old girl wearing a thread-bare robe was seated on the dry earth in front of a mud-walled hut, scouring platters as though her life depended on the brightness of the metal. A few yards away, her small brother, mantled gloriously by Mother Nature in the soft, rich tints belonging to his natural skin, and with his loins girt with knotted red thread—worn as a charm—was playing with a tame starling tethered to his wrist. A younger brother, arrayed simply in sunshine, with a crown of crimson flowers on his head, resembled a sun-clad personification of Khama-deva—the Hindu god of love. Looking like a dusky-golden Cupid, he held in one hand a mimic bow, strung with scarlet blossoms, while, with arms outstretched, he balanced himself, as he shuffled along in his father's waiting-shoes. Despite his humble birth, and the unpretending position of life which left him naked, he seemed a radiant child of the gods—a little lord of the sunbeams and the flowers that made his lowly abiding-place a temple of beauty.

The Old Parade Ground, which had ceased

to be a place of exercise for troops, now came within Asta's range of vision. Ambling drowsily along a foot-beaten track, a string of camels, freighted with grain-filled bags, showed in sharp relief against the hills. Crossing the open from another direction, several ponderous elephants, loaded with sugar-cane, threw colossal shadows on the short, dry grass of the ground, and, further on, a dozen tired bullocks, unyoked for the purpose from heavy waggons, were slaking their thirst at a stream.

The *rath* in which Vanita and Asta were travelling reached the bazaar, where, in the hovel-like shops, sweetmeats for the festival were exposed for sale, arranged pyramidically tier upon tier, and decorated with tinfoil and garlands of natural flowers.

The air was astir with a great din of voices belonging to the holiday-makers who sauntered along the road or loitered near the sweet-stalls. Many occupants of the houses were congregated on the roofs, from whence came the sound of primitive stringed instruments, twanged by hired musicians. Through the uproar pulsed, like the heart-throb of a people, the incessant reverberation of the tom-toms—the small multitudinous drums on which, from dawn to dawn, in time of festivity, the drummers' restless hands never ceased to play.

Within the crowded city centre, the lame, the leprous, the deaf and the dumb, the blind, the palsied, the famished, and the poison-festered, besought charity, and were not denied; while for the amusement of the gayer throng the juggler practised his artifices, and the magician exercised his sorcery. Perched higher than the housetops, the supple-limbed acrobat, supported on swaying poles of bamboo, performed his tight-rope feats. In a cleared space below, the gipsy-bred tamer of savage beasts—his own wild eyes alight with an unchanging brightness, like the glitter in the eyes of a hunting-leopard—chanted fiercely his descriptive song, and strutted and wrestled with his tinsel-bedecked bear. On a gaudy mat that was spread in the dust, a shrill-voiced dancing-girl, with stiffly-braided hair and betel-reddened mouth, displayed her voluminous rainbow-coloured skirt as she glided into seductive attitudes, slowly circling her irised scarf while she intoned her sensual songs. In an obscure corner a serpent-charmer stood triumphant, in the embrace of his fork-tongued cobras, the heads of which, with their hoods spread, framed his face, while he crooned his snake-enthraling chant. Near the gutters prowled ownerless pariah-dogs, lapping up fallen grains of *khia*; while toy-delighted chil-

dren fluttered windwheels of gaily-tinted paper, or vaunted little artificially-flowered cages in which imitation birds flew round on wire.

With the *bad-maash* of the market-place, the defrauder made merry over the ruin of his dupe, and the stealer bartered away his stealth-gotten store. In a haunt of gilded squalor, the gamester, fiercely intent, gambled with cards and dice, and the trickster cheated, undetected. Screened from the gaze of passers-by, the dram-drinker, athirst for the wine of hell, drained, with desire unquenched, his fiery cup; near him lounged the ribald, leering over his own foul witticism; and in a darkened opium-den drowsed opium-eaters dreamed their drug-begotten dreams.

From footpath to house-top palpitated a motley assemblage, generated from various tribal ranks, and organized by manifold systems of worship — embracing with equal force ignorance and comprehension, chastity and corruption, compassion and cruelty, sanctity and crime.

It was man's way—the long alley that, by man, had been cleft narrowly through countless ages, and which, starting from the boundless beginning, had continued in uniform contractedness towards the unknown end.

Amidst the throng walked a religious devotee,

nude, save for his sacred girding-strings and a few strips of tree-bark, the latter being bound about his loins with a piece of antelope-skin, received at a consecratory rite. He carried a pilgrim's staff, an alms-receiving bowl, and a small earthen waterpot—the possessions that constituted part of the insignia of his faith. From his sun-scorched, ash-powdered head his hair straggled in whip-like strands extending to his elbows; his body, vigorous and clean of blemish or disease, was whitened with hoary dust from hallowed ground. Overspanning his breast was a chaplet of knotted thread that hung from his neck with his rosary, formed of one hundred and eight eleocarpus-seeds, on which he was accustomed to count his prayers. On his brow, above which projected a portion of his hair matted to the shape of a horn, appeared his sacred mark, consisting of three horizontal lines of white sandal-paste, the triple stroke bearing in red ochre other symbols of his faith. His food-bowl, which he carried suspended from a string, was formed from the polished shell of a coco-nut.

Walking with austerity, he kept his gaze on the ground, lest by treading on minute things he might destroy particles of life which owed their existence to the Divine will.

By the crowd he was revered as a holy man

whose life was dedicated to devout contemplation, a forest Brahmin who meditated continually on the *Udgitha*, the solemn monosyllable 'Om,' that was almost too sacred to be uttered; 'Om,' expressing the eternity of soul, the union of mind with the supreme force; 'Om,' signifying the mysterious and glorious sway of the Very Being, the Creative Spirit of all life.

Through penance, prayer, and sacrifice, the devotee sought to subdue his earthly passions, subjecting his flesh to humiliation, that his spirit might attain sublimity, until, no longer shackled by the earthly qualities of life, he might, after death, be free to enter the final abode of the blessed.

With awe the pleasure-seekers made way for him to pass, lest his steps should be deterred by so much as the shadow of human beings adhering to a sordid life.

At the close of day, unsolicited alms might be deposited in his bowl; otherwise, he would return to his forest hermitage, gathering on the road wild herbs and berries for his solitary repast. Having cast off worldliness, he demanded nothing of the world. Of the substances unessential to bare existence and to the performance of sacred rites, he possessed none and desired none. From the food that might come to his bowl at the fall of evening

he would give unstintingly to the poor who begged in his path, reserving for his own needs only that for which no other hungered.

Looking perpetually on the ground, he continued on his way, until his imposing and all but naked form was hidden by the moving mass of gaily arrayed individuals who thronged in on the path which had been cleared for him.

Asta loved to watch the movement and glitter of the crowd, to observe an occasional building which, from basement to roof, was embellished with gods and goddesses, outlined in indigo and ochre.

Above the irregular roof of the densely constructed shops and dwelling - places towered the beautiful fluted domes of temples and shrines, and the minarets of mosques gleamed marble-pale against the turquoise sky. A few antique mansions had their façades adorned with mosaic-like paint-work that invested their many niches with an appearance of unfaded splendour.

Sun - illuminated and age-mellowed, the scene presented a kaleidoscopic harmony, formed from the unity of a thousand tones of sound, a thousand shades of colour, a thousand details of custom, brilliant, intangible, and transitory as soap-bubbles blown

from a reed, yet immersed in a mighty life-wave, a profound oneness, as immeasurable as space, as eternal as Time. Man's way, chequered with the lights and shades of passion, pleasure, and pain; the limited groove encompassed by the limitless universe from which man issued and into which man merged, when love, hate, avarice, and ambition evaporated from the form of quickless clay that was once the all of individual man.

CHAPTER IV

A THORN

WITH tinsel a-glitter and bells a-jingle, the *rath* reached the end of the bazaar, and turned upon a shady road where the din of voices became less distinct, the sound gradually fading to a mere hum—but only the vocal sound, for from all directions came the monotonous rhythm of the drums that vibrated, with echo undimmed, from village to village.

Ahead stretched the tea-growing district, with its spiny hedges of giant cactus-plants, and its numerous rows of dark-green, level tea-shrubs, cooling and soothing to the sun-scorched sight after the white glare of the roadways, the many-acred, stirless plantations on which the European tea-planter, governing his hundreds of coolies, fought his weary fight against over-production and the ever-increasing demand for an alien leaf.

From behind the velvet curtains of the bullock-drawn conveyance Asta had caught

vivid glimpses of the roadside performances. She had smiled over the antics of the wrestling bear; she had watched, with fascinated eyes, the serpents responding to the drowsy song of their enchanter; and she had held her breath at the daring feats accomplished by the striped-turbaned rope-dancers. Those entertainments being now beyond the range of her vision, she let the curtains fall, and composed herself in a restful attitude on the velvet cushions. She was anticipating, with pleasure, meeting her brothers, Raban, Tejman, and Karind, who were married and living in the district a few miles off, where they managed a large landed estate belonging to Rukmin.

In thinking of her brothers and their wives and children, Asta let her mind drift back into the old depressing groove—the dark groove into which the absence of Almos had crushed her spirit.

With resentful bitterness she clenched her right hand over her left wrist—the wrist which should have been encircled by the thread of iron, slender yet strong, more lasting than silver, more durable than gold, unbreakable except by a deed of actual severance—the iron emblem of wedlock.

At the end of this journey she would be greeted by blissful young wives who would

regard her with scornful pity, considering as worthless her numerous jewels, because among them appeared not the iron circlet, of so cherished a significance, that when removed after the death of its wearer, the metal thread would have been represented by a red cord tied round her pulseless wrist.

In death, as in life, Asta's ignominy would be evidenced, and the knowledge made her clench her hands in silent misery. Darkness had descended suddenly upon her soul. Not half an hour ago she had felt eager to rejoice in the joyousness of the festival; now had risen before her the heart-haunting, unprolific skeleton that could blast her sweetest hopes to ashes of bitterness. For, young in years as she was, her religious training had taught her that woman's essential virtue lay in pure wifehood and the honourable bearing of children.

To be denied these holy privileges was to be contemned as a breeder of death and famine, was to be shunned as a foreshadower of earthly calamities. She was smitten with the piercing remembrance. It was like the keen barb-thrust of a poisoned arrow, which, when it entered the flesh, could make the world's lustre grow black and direful to the anguished sight of the sufferer.

To die unwedded—to die childless! To be

like dry, dead dust in which the divine spark of creation might at no time be kindled ! To wither in an unfruitful existence, of as little worth to humanity as a clod of unfertilized clay, or a handful of sand ! No deeper shame, no sorrier sin could her life yield.

She lowered her face upon her hands, and strove to thrust from her inward vision the awful aspect of her future ; strove to stifle the terrible foreknowledge which, while it seemed to cast an icy band of death round her heart, scorched her soul as with a brand of fire.

To be thus unblessed in this world was to be unblessed in the world beyond mortality, since only through the sanctity of wifedom and the glory of motherhood could she hope to reach heaven.

For her transgression against the divine law of productivity there would be no pardon. For the lost vocation of her youth there would be no redemption. Not through ordeal by fasting, or through ordeal by fire, could she make atonement for the afflictive wrong which would envelop her being in ignominy. From no source whatsoever could come solace or balm. The drops of holy water she might take from the all-compassionate Mother Ganges would be acrid tears of pity. For one bent beneath so cruel a ban the heart of the patient

Mother Earth would be adamant, and the sweet breast of Mother Nature would be a pillow of thorns. The very thunder-fire of heaven would write her shame in life-shrivelling strokes that would flash down in forks of unquenchable flame.

Nowhither could one thus blighted find refuge from the scatheful lash of scorn which would scourge her spirit ; nowhither could she escape from the myriad-barbed burden which would overwhelm her heart. By no power would she be allowed to forget the piteous ban beneath which she had fallen. Even the voices of the air would proclaim her misery and howl her down under the eternal curse. Everlastingly in her ears would sound, like a wolf-cry, the dreary words : 'Thou childless one ! get thee hence under the shadow of the world ! Hide thou thy shame in everlasting darkness !' She drew a broken breath of mental torture, a clammy coldness crept under her skin, and she clenched her hands together until drops of blood rubied the satiny skin where her nails pressed. The sharp, sighing sound which came through her lips, slight as it was, struck on the ears of Vanita, who opened her eyes and looked at her daughter.

'Already you are weary of this journey,' Vanita observed. 'I will instruct the driver to

make greater speed, that we may sooner arrive at our destination.'

'Do not trouble yourself, mother dear,' Asta replied; 'I am satisfied with the pace at which we are going. By travelling slowly we can be entertained by many joyous sights on the roadway.'

She had raised her face from her hands, and had forced a smile to her lips—a smile in which there was a pathetic heroism. Her wish was not to dull another's pleasure by an expression of her own sorrow. Asta's grief was dry-eyed, therefore there was no betrayal of herself by tears, and the tiny drops of blood that had sprung to the surface of her hands had dried unnoticed. It seemed to her that if she gave back smile for smile nobody to-day would guess at the barrenness of her heart.

However, Vanita, with her quick instincts of tenderness, was not deceived.

'Because of the absence of Almos your eyes are full of disquiet,' she said. 'Do not distress yourself on his account, pearl; there is no need for your heart to be troubled.'

'How so?' Asta asked sadly.

'Make yourself merry, pearl, and I will tell you that which I have kept to myself since the earliest hours of the day, thinking you had pleasure enough in this festival.'

'Let me hear the best you can inform me,' Asta said, 'for my heart is very sore.'

'I cannot do otherwise, since your looks are no longer of happiness,' Vanita responded. 'Listen, lotus. At the time this day's dawn was crimsoning the sky I awoke from a dream in which was visioned forth the return of Almos. Even as dreams dreamed at midnight must be interpreted by contradistinction, the dreams of early morning ever vision forth the reality; so, for a certainty, Almos will speedily return.'

'Would that to me also had come a fore-token of his presence,' Asta remarked. 'Did your dream disclose the day on which he will arrive?'

'Be assured the time is not far off. In my vision, I saw you rich with youthful bloom as you are now, and a voice like mingled sounds of music proclaimed: "Almos is come! Almos is come!"'

'May your dream be realized!' Asta exclaimed. 'The blossoming of many seasons has faded since I beheld Hiran the master-merchant. The coming of Almos would scarcely recompense me for his long delay. if, before his return, my youthfulness had fled.'

'I am assured that at the time of his return

you will look even as you look now,' Vanita replied, with the earnest superstition of her race. 'The voice of my dream uttered these words: "Behold, Almos seeks his bride, Asta the beautiful, Asta whose eyes are soft as twilights, and whose form is full of flower-like grace. Wherefore in her fairness comes she not forth? Almos stands at the portal—Almos awaits his welcome!"'

'Glad would I be, and joyfully would I go forth, did I know he awaited me,' Asta said; 'but my heart is heavy with doubt, for, as you have had favourable omens, I have had inauspicious ones. Did you notice as we walked from the door of my father's house Aramida the string-weaver standing near?'

'I saw, but heeded her not, remembering her to be a widow.'

'I, also, with caution avoided her shadow,' Asta said; 'yet I could not escape the gloom of her glance. Some women say she possesses the power of the evil-eye, and that at her threshold there crouches a dog possessed of an evil spirit. Do you believe there is any truth in the dreadful gossip?'

With a negatory gesture Vanita waved her hands, palms upwards.

'The saying falls from idle lips,' she said. 'The string-weaver is but evil-fortuned.'

Knowing the sourness of her ill-favoured features, she purposely startled you with her morose looks. Maybe, pearl, a throe of envy made her appear more crab-faced than usual, for, being a widow, she knows she can never don bright garments, or take part in a festival. As to the dog, I am told it is but a harmless starveling that waits for a fallen crumb from her daily bread. Trouble not your mind with fear of the woman. She is no more than Aramida the widow, Aramida the childless, Aramida the ill-starred !

‘Worse there could not be,’ Asta remarked, with bitterness. ‘In all likelihood her shadow darkened our threshold at the time you gave me birth. It will seem so if as you have said of her others say of me : “Lo ! there stands Asta the husbandless, Asta the childless, Asta the cross-starred !”’

Vanita’s countenance maintained its repose.

‘None will say those things of you, lotus-pearl.’

‘Can you prove such to be a fact ?’ Asta said. ‘In time even I may grow crab-faced through the endurance of heavy trials. For how looks the fairest tree after it has been torn by many storms and struck by the fire of the tempest ? Does the withered bough display the green, unfolding leaf, the eye-gladdening blossom,

the generous fruit it had yielded in time of verdure? Does the sweetest flower-plant, deprived of light and water, give forth its pristine abundance of bloom and fragrance? Ah, no!" she went on passionately. "The tender leaf of the once gracious tree is wrinkled and parched. Where there was freshness, there is decay; where burst forth the rich shoots, all is sapless, sear and sombre! . . . And the neglected and down-trodden flower-plant shows never a bud which is not shrunk into a seedless semblance of its natural bloom!"

On Asta's eyelashes hung two tears that sparkled like diamonds in the streak of brilliant sunlight which came through the narrow openings in the curtain. The withered tree, the undeveloped flower, represented to her imagination what her own life would be—gloomy, isolated, barren. . . . And she loved song and sunshine, the evening dew, the tender shades of growing leaves, the fragrant bloom of expanding flowers! Already she felt her heart to be bitter; already she detected bitterness in her words; already she contemplated bitterly her future. Soon her features would bear the impress of her misery, and acrid hopelessness would stare out from her eyes. Soon, like the sear tree, her soul would become stark and solitary, and, like the benighted flower, her

heart would perish of neglect. Soon to her body and her mind light would be as darkness, and darkness would be as death. Soon, so pitifully soon, her once glowing hopes would be burnt to blackest ashes of despair!

Her tear drops fell upon her clasped hands. She had prayed for such a different destiny—for her lot to be cast in light and melody and fragrance—for love to be her guiding gleam. And now the shining rose-path which had trailed through her dreams seemed swallowed up in an abyss of impenetrable blackness, a fathomless gulf into which she must descend evermore to sink deeper in the dreaded depths.

Upon her tightly clasped hands she felt Vanita's gentle touch.

'Have faith, pearl,' Vanita said softly.

'Faith!' Asta echoed. 'I have faith in all—but my own prosperity.'

'Nay, pearl, you must not break my heart with your misgiving.'

'My own will soon be past the breaking,' Asta exclaimed, without lifting her head. Then with vehement bitterness she added: 'I wish that you had never given me birth. I wish that you had died rather than I had been born to be a sorrow-bearer.'

Vanita felt as though she had received an unexpected blow from a fiery rod. The pas-

sionately uttered regret seemed to burn into her heart. Speech failed her, and in the momentary silence she experienced a pang more poignant than any she had endured throughout the years of her life.

At length, in a choking voice, she murmured :

‘Do you begrudge me the sweetest flower in my wreath of happiness ?’

‘I grudge you nothing that is sweet,’ Asta answered. ‘I wish only that in your wreath of happiness no bitter thorn had found a place.’

‘No thorn has found a place in aught that touches me,’ Vanita said.

‘Yet you have felt the sharp probe of my speech,’ Asta retorted. ‘What but a spine could so prick your heart and make it sore ?’

‘A spine cannot heal the wound it inflicts,’ Vanita replied ; ‘whereas you yourself have ever been a balm to the pain you have unwittingly caused ; so a thorn you cannot be.’

‘You bear with me lovingly and patiently,’ Asta exclaimed, with a twinge of remorse.

‘As I bore you with patience and with love,’ Vanita returned, ‘never was I more gladdened than in possessing my lotus-child.’

‘Even myself.’

‘Yourself, dear one.’

‘Then your joy is my sorrow, for I do not care to live,’ Asta responded.

'If that were true, my own sorrow would devour my joy, so great would be my grief,' Vanita said. 'But I am convinced otherwise. I know that happiness awaits you, for I have had many bliss-portending signs. You are aware how lucky it is if, after sleep, one's waking gaze falls upon a looking-glass. Yester morning I awoke to find my glance resting on a tiny mirror set in a ring I had worn throughout the night. The scrap of silvered glass glittered like a gem, dazzling my waking sight, and I knew the omen was one of approaching joy.'

'For you, perhaps,' Asta replied, 'but for me there can never be gladness.'

Vanita raised her hands impressively, and her faith in the good to come brought a look of triumph to her handsome face.

'Wait!' she exclaimed. 'Wait till my dream is fulfilled.'

'I can but wait,' Asta said, 'and while I wait I can but weep.'

Scarcely had the words left her lips, when there was a sudden jolting of the *rath*—a grinding sound, followed by a crash, and the conveyance was pitched sideways at an angle that flung Asta and Vanita out upon the road. One of the cumbrous wheels had become disconnected from the axle, and the bullocks, swerving

round under the strain, plunged into a ditch and dragged the carriage over on its side.

The driver raised a shout for the five club-bearers who should have been close by ; but the men had failed to resist the numerous temptations in the bazaar with its festal decorations, and had lingered behind, beyond hearing distance of the driver's repeated shouts :

'Ho ! lathi-wala ! Ho ! lathi-wala !'

Hearing no response to his loud call, the driver's next thought was for the frightened bullocks, whose heads were bent painfully by the position in which the yoke had been pushed. With characteristic calmness he went forward to relieve their necks from the strain, considering that to be his most urgent duty.

Bruised by the fall, and half blinded by the dust, Vanita struggled, unaided, to her feet. She uttered a cry of dismay as she saw Asta lying unconscious on the ground.

Having the appearance of one bereft of life, Asta lay in the dust, her closed eyelids unmoved by the fierce glare of the sun, for after she had been thrown to the ground, the pole, dragged by the bullocks as they swerved round, had struck her head with a force that had deprived her of animation.

Vanita knelt down and pillowed on her bosom the girl's drooping head.

‘Loved one, show me not this cruel semblance of death!’ she cried. ‘Dear one, awake—awake!’

But Asta heard not, looked not, moved not. Her eyes were sunk in their sockets, and lines of a leaden hue were set about her mouth. Each moment her face became more shrunken, more death-like. It was as if her bright spirit had been driven from her fragile body—as though the light of her being had gone out, like a lamp-flame suddenly extinguished. Over her motionless form the sun poured its white, clear radiance, while there fell upon the air the quick hand-beat of the festal drums—the tom-toms that had voice, and seemed to live, throbbing, throbbing, throbbing, with continuous rapidity until their wild, weird reverberation seemed like the mechanical pulsation of a monster human machine, agitating the blood-tides and shaking the passion-valves of an ancient people of the land.

The vast circle of palpitating sound seemed to emphasize the silence and stillness of Asta. The penetrating sunlight that opened the roadside buds and matured the full-blown flowers wrought no change in her upturned face. Her eyelids, like shadowy petals, remained closed to the searching sunshine, and her mouth was dull and parched, like a rose that is dead.

And from Vanita's lips there broke a wordless cry of appeal—an inarticulate utterance of exceeding love and pitifulness. For it seemed to her that no one would come to the assistance of Asta, who would be left to die in the dust, with the sun scorching down upon her parched face

CHAPTER V

MAN THE BELOVED

'A WOMAN bawling! Probably women quarrelling! It were better I should not arrive upon the scene until the bawler has departed in peace.'

Thus reflected Nara, a handsome young zemindar, as he made his way on foot along the road. He had chosen a foot-track under the trees, between which pierced the brilliant sunshine, that made a changeful network of leaf shadows on his emerald-hued brocade tunic, which garment reached below the knees. He walked with an erect gait, and, notwithstanding the half-satirical expression the sound of a woman's wail had brought to his face, his countenance was singularly pleasing. His long, heavy-lashed eyes, level, delicate brows, aquiline nose, thin, firm mouth, and shapely chin, formed beauty of an Eastern type, mellowed by a complexion of a clear pale bronze. His muslin turban, folded high, and striped with glittering thread of gold, was of the tint of a

topaz ; the red, pointed shoes which shod his otherwise bare feet were ornamented with metallic stitches ; his trousers, composed of finest white linen, were shaped to fit, hose-like, from knee to ankle ; and he was scarfed with a flowing scarlet *du-shala*, that, gathered into close folds, was passed beneath his right arm and drawn up across his breast, the loose fringed ends falling from his left shoulder and descending beyond the hem of his tunic. His general air betokened prosperousness, gaiety, and inborn refinement.

In order to delay his arrival upon what he imagined to be the scene of a general quarrel, he stopped and plucked from a roadside shrub a crimson hibiscus-blossom, which he stuck in the front of his turban. His hand had scarcely left the flower when the woman's cry again penetrated his ears.

This time he detected in it a note of unmistakable despair—of appeal—of pitifulness. He hurried forward in the direction of the sound, quickening his stride until he reached the spot whence the cry had issued. At a glance he perceived what had happened, and paused to observe the situation with quiet comprehensiveness.

Vanita was still kneeling in the dust, supporting in her arms Asta's inanimate form.

The bullocks, released from the yoke, were standing patiently at the side of the road, while, in a resigned manner, the driver examined the injury to the carriage. Now and then he discontinued his useless occupation, and peered along the road in the direction of the bazaar, while, hoping his voice would arrest the attention of the tardy cudgel-bearers, he renewed his languid shout :

'Aho ! lathi-wala ! Aho ! lathi-wala !'

The driver's uplifted voice drowned Nara's footsteps. Unobserved by Vanita, he had time, before making known to her his presence, to take in a detailed impression of the decorated bullocks and the overturned vehicle. He arrived at the conclusion that they were the property of Rukmin the zemindar, and further inferred that the woman and the girl thrown into so helpless a plight were Rukmin's wife and daughter.

Previous to approaching nearer, Nara, with an air of deference, stepped from his shoes. He then advanced barefoot, and stood at a respectful distance from Vanita, who was moaning dismally, as she rocked herself in an agony of heart-torture.

'Cease your lamentation, O Zamin-darni !' he said, in a gentle voice. *'Dismay has overtaken you while your husband and sons are*

not near to give you help. At so distressful a time I wait to be of assistance. Permit me, O lady, to act as a trustworthy son, for in friendship I am even as a brother to the praiseworthy sons of Rukmin, the honoured zemindar who is your husband.'

Vanita did not so much as glance at him. She responded simply to the voice that had addressed her.

'Who is he who speaks my husband's name in friendliness?' she asked.

'He whom your cry of distress has summoned hither is Nara,' came the answer.

'What and whence is he who thus styles himself?' she inquired. 'It is not enough that I should know him merely by that name.'

'Hear then, lady, the name of Zarrin, the zemindar whose justice has made him renowned in many districts. Before you stands his son.'

At the sound of the name of Zarrin, which she had heard uttered with respect on previous occasions, Vanita raised her head. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Nara made a courteous obeisance, which she could not but perceive.

With a deepening sense of conventional duty, she veiled Asta's death-like face; then, impelled by a more forcible apprehension and

longing, she thrust back wildly the silken covering. She would not shut from her view the beautiful inanimate face. Her gaze should not be torn from the dear closed eyes, the sweet, silent lips! She must watch for the faintest quiver of returning life, the feeblest flicker of awakening consciousness!

'Go—go!' she exclaimed, with a commanding wave of her hand to Nara.

He understood her distress, and bent his gaze upon the ground.

'Fear not, O *Zamin-darni*,' he said. 'Is it unfit that the brother of your sons should look upon your daughter? Howsoever that may be, I have not sought to gaze upon her face. I know not whether she be fair-featured and beautiful, or wry-nosed and hideous; I came but to the sound of your despair, I who am of the house of Zarrin.'

'*Aho! lathi-wala!*' shouted the driver, drawling the syllables, listlessly.

Nara turned with impatience towards him.

'Silence!' he exclaimed. 'Call no longer to servants who are unworthy to serve.'

Vanita, whose attention was again absorbed in trying to revive animation in the pallid face pillowed on her lap, had become as one deaf and blind to Nara's presence.

He walked to the side of the road, and broke

off a couple of plaintain-leaves, which, notwithstanding the heat of the hour, retained their almost icy coolness.

‘Make a shade of one of these,’ he said, laying the leaves on the ground near Vanita, ‘and adapt the other as a fan.’

Knowing the cooling properties of the great leaves, Vanita took one and tore it into pieces, laying the fragments on Asta’s brow and breast, and in the palms of her hands. The other she utilized as a fan, at the same time feeling grateful to the young zemindar for his prompt suggestion.

Glad to find he was not repulsed, he possessed himself of several more plantain-leaves, which, with the aid of a few twigs and stones, he arranged deftly as a screen between Asta and the sun-glare. By degrees her slender form was almost completely covered by the cool, green leaves that were effectual in the concealment of her beauty.

Having provided the leaves, Nara stood apart, waiting for he knew not what—he who, in the language of Hindustan, was called ‘eternal man’—man as he was when he sprang first to conscious manhood; man as he had continued, without intermission, since the quickening of mind; man as he would remain throughout the mighty age of thought;

man of one substance, the infinitesimal yet forceful atoms of which were as inseparable from the unchanging entity as the moments of the hours were inseparable from time: past, present, and future being an indivisible limitlessness, as interminable as birth, generation, and death, the three God-measured paces—beautiful, incomprehensible, awful—in the interminate march of existent man. Thus had he been named—‘Nara.’

Manlike, he began to wonder whether the leaves hid a face the features of which were hideously awry, or whether loveliness lay there sheltered from his eyes. While carrying the plantain-leaves he had, without intending to let his glance light upon her, caught an unavoidable glimpse of her delicately formed left arm and hand, and he had detected with surprise the absence of the iron bangle.

He had heard nothing of her story—of the incidents which years ago had clouded her life; and it seemed to him that, were she of countenance comely, the iron circlet would not be awanting. A widow he knew she was not, by the richness of her rose-coloured robe.

A glimmering ray of the truth strayed across his mind as he contemplated the circumstances which had left himself unwedded.

In Nara's early years his father had be-

trothed him to a wealthy landowner's daughter, who had died a few weeks before the concluding ceremonies of the marriage were to have been performed. Nobody suited to take her place could be found immediately. Of the young girls suggested to Zarrin with regard to his selection of a daughter-in-law, one lacked sufficient dower; another was debarred by opposing zodiacal signs in her horoscope; a third lacked fairness of feature; a fourth was of an indolent disposition; a fifth by her love of talking promised to become a shrew.

As time went on Zarrin became more ambitious—more fastidious in the choice of a wife for his son, with the result that, at eighteen, Nara, who searched for one sweet flower-wreathed face of which he had caught a passing glimpse, walked his way, free, plighted neither in marriage nor in betrothal.

He reflected that some such destiny might have overtaken the girl who lay unconscious under the green leaves.

'Probably,' he thought, 'the bridegroom chosen for her died in infancy, and no other has been found worthy to receive her hand in marriage.'

Nara made up his mind to question her brothers upon the subject as soon as an opportunity afforded itself.

Although, governed by his inherent courtesy, he kept his gaze turned away from her, his quick ears caught the sound of a faint, piteous articulation which he felt sure came from Asta—a sound, half sigh, half moan.

He was in doubt as to whether he ought to retire before she had detected his presence, or whether it would be more fitting for him to remain until the carriage was repaired and the bullocks again yoked. The wheel was lying intact where it had rolled, and not many yards off he could see, partially buried in the dust, the wedge which, by becoming dislodged, had caused the mishap.

Asta herself decided the question that was revolving in his mind.

She opened her eyes, and seemed to look into a dark, whirling mist through which she recognized nothing but Vanita's face, which loomed, indistinct and shadow-like, upon the girl's sight. She had no recollection of what had happened, or why she was lying on the ground. A strange, rushing noise filled her ears, and from very weariness she let her lids drop over her aching eyes.

She lay still for a few moments, and then unclosed her eyes, to find her vision clearer and memory returning in fragments to her brain. She recollected that she was Asta, the

unwedded, and there issued from her lips a sound which fell piteously on Nara's ears.

Half raising herself, she broke, like a pink-petalled flower, through the long, loose leaves, and, leaning her head upon her hand, she began to regret that memory had returned to her, that her sorrow had not been sunk for ever in oblivion. She gazed dully at the surrounding objects which were becoming gradually familiar to her sight. . . . And her dazed glance lighted unexpectedly upon Nara, while he stood proudly erect, yet with down-cast eyes, silent and motionless.

Like the rosiness of dawn rising through the grey mist of a departing night, the dream she had heard interpreted just before she had been stunned illuminated her mind. The amazement that had for a moment widened her eyes was transformed to delight. As she beheld Nara, a sudden ecstasy glorified her face, and, rising tremblingly to her knees, she stretched out to him her tender, eager arms.

'The dream!' she cried, in a soft, thrilling voice—'the dream is realized! He—my beloved—has come! . . . The gods be praised! The gods be praised!'

The rapture of delight, like a fountain rippling through her life, suffused her being, and there issued joyously from her lips the name

she had so often uttered in longing and prayer :
' Almos—Almos !'

The song of the name rang through her heart and thrilled her lips, and the exultation in her soul surrounded her as with a glory. Between her outstretched arms she bowed her head, until the fringe of jewels on her brow gemmed the earth, while she murmured :

' A hundred thousand welcomes !—a hundred thousand welcomes to my dear lord !'

The night of her sorrow was passed, and in its place had arisen joy's glittering dawn, above which scintillated the white shining morning star of love. And through the luminance of her gladdened soul, she saw the man she believed to be Almos standing enveloped in god-like splendour—he whom the gods had sent to her—her intended husband !

She had pictured Almos many times to herself ; but never had she imagined him with such tenderness of countenance, such majesty of manner, such princeliness of bearing. She saw the red flower set above his brow, and wondered if the gods had placed it there. While she wondered, his gaze, until now down bent, strayed to her face, and he recognized the features that for many days had haunted his mind—the beautiful face of which ere now he had caught one unexpected glimpse.

Their glances met and held together with magnetic power, and as if drawn along the invisible current, the heart of the man seemed to reach and touch the heart of the girl. Nara and Asta drew their breath in conscious accord, their chests rising and falling simultaneously, as though the breath of each hung on the other's breathing.

Nara broke the trance-like silence. Raising his hands, he bowed his forehead upon them, in profound salutation.

'Hail! O daughter of Rukmin!' he said, his voice scarcely above a murmur.

She bowed herself at his feet, while she returned his greetings with the words:

'All-hail, my own beloved lord! All-hail, most glorious son of Hiran!'

'Nay, sweet lady,' he said, with a glow of suppressed ardour in his full, deep eyes; 'your beloved lord I would deem it an honour to be, and gladly would I stake every other earthly happiness to gain such dear bliss, but son of Hiran I am not.'

As one whose mind was still wrapped in a dream, Asta raised her head and let her wondering gaze dwell on his face.

'Not the son of Hiran?' she echoed, in a bewildered manner. 'Since when has Almos disclaimed his father?'

'I know nothing of Almos,' he replied gravely.

'But you—you are Almos!' she said, 'Almos for whom I have waited—Almos my beloved!'

The soft fire of her glance sank into Nara's soul, and quickened his pulses.

'Would that I were in truth Almos whom you name, if it is he who should be your husband!' he exclaimed. 'Mistake not, fairest lady. Bestow not upon me gentle words intended for another, lest afterwards you should recall the speech, leaving me sadder for its loss than if I had never known its sweetness. I myself am Nara, son of Zarrin the zemindar, and, O most lovely one, this is not the first occasion on which I have gazed upon your tender features. You yourself, in the midst of many women and young girls—all veiled and carrying flowers to a sacred stream—passed a kingly tree, aflame with bloom, beneath which I had halted to give rest to my horse. So devoutly downcast were your eyes, that you looked not my way. But, as though the gods had parted from your face the screening veil, a breath of wind blew it aside, and I beheld you, crowned with oleander-blossoms and with garlands of jasmine girdling your robe. So you passed, with drooped eyelids and lips parted in holy song, your parentage to me unknown; nor when you had passed could

I learn anything, except their smallness, from the rose-fragrant prints your feet had left in the sand. Yet your face had formed in my eyes an after-image that could not fade, and your countenance, so meek, so chaste, so sweet, has ever since been in my vision. Night by night I have dreamed of you, and day by day I have made pilgrimages to the flame-blossomed tree, hoping you would pass again in your jasmined robe, and that the gods would be kind, and, for my gaze, part once more your virgin veil.'

She listened with bated breath and parted lips. Every tone of his voice seemed to touch a new-formed chord in her soul, attuning it to a joyous melody. No matter his name, no matter his ancestry, he had sought her for many days, and he was the beloved one the gods had sent to be the lord of her heart.

'And you are called Nara?' she murmured, repeating the unfamiliar name as though it held magic. Then, like one inspired, she added: 'But, O princely one! I have beheld you with my naked eyes; I have heard you with my eager ears; I have touched you with my inward self; and you alone are my beloved lord, the prince of righteousness for whom I have prayed, and who, my prayers being heeded, have come to be the light of my life!'

'Rested the choice with me, sweetest lady, all would be as you desire,' he responded, in rich, low tones that thrilled her with the tender admiration they expressed. 'My heart is set to the task of winning you for my own delight. . . . When we meet again I hope your hand will be pledged to me in marriage.'

He bowed with stately grace, and as he bent his head the crimson, star-like flower fell from his gold-striped turban, and dropped against her robe.

Remaining on her knees, she lifted the blossom in her hands, and, letting it rest in both her open palms, held it out to him. Her eyes were aglow with youthful fervour as they sought his earnest gaze, and with the crimson flower she seemed to offer him all that was warm and luminous and lovely in herself.

He took the hibiscus blossom and, crushing it in his fingers, thrust it through the opening where his tunic fastened on his breast.

'Having lain in your gentle hands, it will lie like a new-given joy on my heart,' he murmured, pressing his hand over the hidden blossom. Bending towards her, he added, in a fervent tone: 'Wear in your bosom each day such a flower for my sake until we meet again!'

'I will be obedient to your wish,' she said,

lifting the fringe of his scarlet scarf and pressing it for an instant to her forehead.

Her low-spoken words sounded like a troth. From her hands she dropped lingeringly the end of his scarf, but not before she had detached from the fringe a few threads which she wound ring-wise round one of her fingers. It was an auspicious omen, for red was the colour worn alike by bride and bridegroom during the wedding ceremonies, the hue chosen in accordance with ancient tradition, which gave the bright blood-tint prominence as an emblem of triumph, the colour symbolizing courage and victory and love.

Nara noted with satisfaction the tiny ring of twisted threads that showed carmine-bright against the wheat-tawny tinge of her skin; but, save that his eyes glowed with a deeper fervour, he gave no sign of having observed the little red token. Any tender words he might have uttered were checked on his lips by the angry approach of Vanita, who, holding her veil as a screen to her own face, swept between himself and Asta.

‘I forbid further speech!’ she exclaimed imperiously, standing so that her draperies concealed Asta from his gaze. ‘Depart in shame, son of Zarrin! Would I had not accepted a service proffered in base disloyalty!’

Her whole form was trembling with indignant resentment. Unnerved as she had been by the accident, and by the reaction caused by Asta's return to consciousness, Vanita had felt too dazed at first to realize what she now believed to be Nara's treachery. Observing the ardent look on his face, she had made several feeble attempts to interrupt so scandalous a proceeding, but without effect. Her voice had been so weak from the previous shock that she had been unable to make herself heard, and the shaking of her limbs had prevented her from moving forward as she had at length succeeded in doing.

Nara bent his glance to the earth, yet his pride was not humbled by her rebuke.

'Lady, your anger is as just as it is unjust,' he said gravely. 'Fear not that I will intrude my presence where it is unwelcome; yet will I not go my way till I have seen you safely depart on yours. At my earliest opportunity I will present myself to your esteemed husband, and, explaining all, will make my peace with him, thereby making my peace with you.' .

He bowed low, and as the five laggard attendants arrived at that moment upon the scene, he strode forward and ordered them to readjust the wheel of the conveyance.

The men stared inertly at the disabled vehicle.

‘Master, we are not employed to do a cartwright’s work,’ one muttered, in an assertive manner.

‘A carpenter should be summoned,’ another added, his glance wandering instinctively in the direction of the bazaar, whither he hoped to be dispatched in search of a mender of carts.

‘Master, this is not our trade,’ a third protested.

Holding their brass-bound cudgels, they stood by, sullenly passive.

Nara looked disdainfully from one to another.

‘Do as you are instructed, pariahs!’ he exclaimed.

‘Master, it is not our duty to rob a craftsman of his rightful labour,’ affirmed the delinquent who had spoken first.

‘We are not paid to wheel-mend,’ agreed the second, mutinously.

‘Such is not our work,’ grumbled in chorus the other three.

‘True, stinkards,’ Nara sneered; ‘you should be fellmongers, for work suited to such as you is the cleaning of raw hog-hides. When you render this day’s account to your wage-giver, may you be dealt with according to the worth you have shown!’

‘Yea, Highness,’ the foremost responded,

with covert insolence, while the others leered in an evil way.

Nara waited for no more expressions of defiance from the underlings. He snatched up a Malacca cane he had left near his shoes. With it he dealt the menial who had spoken last several sharp blows across his face and naked shoulders.

'Take the price of thy disrespect,' Nara said, using the personal pronoun 'thy' as an expression of contempt towards an inferior; then, as he gave another fierce cut with his cane, he added mockingly: 'Does the surly son of a vermin-breeder feel the reward to be liberal, or does the conscienceless parasite demand further recompense?'

Smarting under the sting of the cane, and infuriated by the appellative he had received, the *lathi-wala* raised, with sudden menace, his loaded cudgel. He lowered it again, quelled by the contemptuous scorn in the masterful eyes fixed upon him. His hands met, finger-tip to finger-tip, in servile submission, while his lips curled back from his teeth in a distorted grin of fear.

'Master, command, and this slave will obey,' he said. And another man, laying down his club, muttered: 'Whatever the master's order may be, I, too, will labour with obedience.'

Nara waved them both away from him.

'Go, cringelings!' he exclaimed. 'I have already commanded; bend your burden-shirking backs to the task!'

'The Excellency is obeyed!' the men said, with respectful ceremony.

Having subdued two of the rebellious suitors, Nara turned his attention to the other three, on whom the sound of the cane-blows had not been without effect.

'You base-born wage-graspers! What have you to say for yourselves?' he asked, confronting them with his stick raised in readiness to strike, should he meet with further defiance.

Taking their cue from their brother servitors, the three men salaamed humbly.

'Master, we also will obey,' they answered.

'Then give your swinish strength to the duty,' Nara said, 'and try to earn honestly your next skinful of victuals.'

Trying to conceal from him their scowling faces, the men went to do his bidding.

'Perform the work quickly and well,' he called after them; 'the wheel will not be made firm by laggard labour!'

'Hearken!' the driver murmured to his bullocks. 'He is a respect-keeping lord who can so excellently rule our master's servants!'

And he gazed with approval on the young zemindar.

In a short time the wheel was adjusted, the bullocks were yoked, and the conveyance was in readiness to continue along the road.

With her own veil Vanita screened Asta's face until the seclusion afforded by the carriage with its domical canopy was reached.

There was a jingle of bells as the white horn-beasts moved forward, and Asta, straining her ears for a dearly-desired sound, heard, as in a golden echo, Nara's voice as he said :

'Sweetest lady, farewell—until we meet again!'

And the bells seemed to set to the words a tune that to Asta was like the clash of golden cymbals. 'Until we meet again—until we meet again!' The melody went chiming to her heart, attuning her soul to the joyous notes of life's exhilarating song of love.

Under her carnationed veil she clasped softly the red threads tied round her finger, and thought of the flower lying crimson-warm near Nara's heart. And a deeper joy surged through her soul. She had met her prince, in whose power it lay to fill all her earthly days with gladness, and, by and by, to lead her along the hidden way to heaven. No longer was the Land of the Blessed an unapproachable land

to her ; never would her spirit be left athirst ; never would her heart be let to wither in her living bosom. Her whole being would be immersed in delight, and the roses of joy, pure, beautiful, unfading, would infuse eternal brightness and fragrance within her breast. Her prince had saved her. And with beaming eyes and joy-curved lips she praised, silently, his name—the name that she heard the bells catch merrily in their chime—‘Nara—Nara!’

His name seemed to ripple through the air as the bells rang with golden sound. She wondered if the driver and the men guarding the conveyance could hear what kind of melody the bells were chiming. She had never before heard so clear a ringing out of words ; she imagined everybody who came along the road must hear the name of her beloved one ; for the bells, having once caught it up, never ceased to chime it out : ‘Nara—Nara!’

It was heard by Vanita, and her eyes were full of unrest.

‘Woe is me!’ she murmured once, and drew her veil over her ears, in a vain attempt to shut out the sound.

But the tinkle of the bells grew more resonant, more golden, and every leaf and every flower along the road seemed to nod and wave to the inspiring rhythm—‘Nara—Nara!’

And on Asta's lips dwelt, silent and sweet, the breath of the refrain, as fragrance dwells, silent and sweet, upon a rose ; and on her brow she felt a glory, as though she had been suddenly crowned with the warm passion-lilies of love—the vivid and vivifying coronel that would evermore blossom with increasing splendour—a gift of the gods.

CHAPTER VI

‘STONE HER!’

AFTER returning to her home in the evening, Asta passed a feverish night. She had been shaken and bruised by the accident, and her head ached from the blow she had received. Her heightened temperature saved her from the scolding she would otherwise have had to endure, on account of her indiscretion in speaking to Nara and having her face unveiled to his gaze.

It was not a time to heap reproaches upon her. She was in pain, and needed all the tenderness which could be lavished upon her, so she was forgiven and petted as lovingly as though she had never lifted her sweet face to Nara's eyes.

The entire blame of the affair was attributed to the undutifulness of the five attendants, and upon them Rukmin's anger exploded and burnt itself out. With no payment other than the harsh words of blame which were flung in their teeth, and some well-directed blows from a

heavy stick across their backs, they were dismissed at night from Rukmin's service, and were driven from the village. Then the zemindar's wrath had subsided, and with regard to his daughter he felt only a great thankfulness that she had not been killed in the accident.

'Tend her with all the skill you possess,' he said to Vanita, 'and see that she rests with ease.'

'Already your daughter sleeps untroubled,' Vanita replied, relieved that the storm-burst of his anger had not fallen upon herself and Asta.

The next morning, after the sun had risen, Asta, feeling refreshed, mounted the steps leading to the parapeted roof, where, seated on a cushion, she could breathe the balmy air, and, herself unnoticed, watch, through the small, square openings of the reticulated parapet, the signs of life in the roadway below. The breeze, slight as it was, cooled her feverish brow and drove the heaviness from her eyes. On her finger she still wore the tiny, red ring, and, to her order, her waiting-maid had brought her two crimson hibiscus flowers: one Asta had placed in the white drapery at her bosom; the other she had set among her silky tresses, so that it rested on her brow.

The sound of the village drums, the dull

rhythmus of which never varied, vibrated on the air; and, thinking of Nara, she glanced down on the crimson flower on her breast, the flower which seemed to hold for her a glowing message from the prince-like presence that yesterday had come to her as from a dream.

Her mind was full of happy thoughts when, suddenly, in the roadway there was a wild commotion, a noise of excited voices, and the next moment a bolting buffalo came tearing furiously along, scattering all before it. A couple of fearless herds boys, in pursuit, shouted to the brute :

‘Hold there! What art thou about?’ And they tried to get in front to drive the animal back with their brandished sticks.

Then from many voices came the fearsome cry :

‘Look out—look out, thou little one! Keep out of the way! Go back—go back!’

‘Gazing down, Asta saw a naked baby-boy belonging to the shoemaker class, toddle into the middle of the road, and stand, unconscious of danger, in a line with the approaching buffalo.

Several women stood mute with apprehension. Already the huge, hideous, slate-coloured head, with its light eyes and down-curving horns, was within half a yard of the child—already the brute’s snorting breath sprayed the startled baby’s face. The herdsboys uttered a shrill, warning sound which the child was too

young to understand. Against the onward rush of the maddened beast, the soft, dimpled little form had no power of resistance. The child was hurled down in a cloud of dust, and the strong, trampling hoofs were descending to maim the small, naked limbs.

Ah! Could a rescuing hand be stretched forth in time?

Swiftly a woman moved into the midst of the up-flung dust, her dingy-white, unbordered drapery flapping, like the pinions of a bird in the flight, her thin, bangleless arms extended in wild eagerness.

Resembling an angel of death rather than an angel of life, Aramida the widow threw herself in front of the buffalo, and snatched up the fallen child. As she raised herself and held the child aloft, the huge head of the infuriated beast struck and gored her breast. Her face went livid, and her features shrank with the agony of the injury she had sustained; but, knowing that one false step, one breathing-space, would have brought the child again under the tearing hoofs, she gave a swift, almost superhuman leap to one side, and staggered until she came in contact with a wall, against which she leaned for support, while the animal, followed by the herdsboys, rushed savagely by.

The child was saved! His little arms clung trustfully round Aramida's neck; his little head was pillowed softly against her throat; one dimpled shoulder touched her lips. For the first time in all her wedded and all her widowed life she held a child in her arms—a little, naked, living child. How sweet against her bosom felt the nestling form! The clinging arms were so velvet-soft, the small head was so caressing, and the innocent breathing thrilled her with such an unspeakable tenderness! Surely she had earned this one moment of delicious joy—this sweet delight of a child's embrace! . . . But the pain of her riven breast was very great; it sickened her and made her reel as though she would fall. Yet she held the child closely, wondering vaguely whether she would have strength to carry him to his mother, to lay him at her feet and say, 'Lo! I have saved thy son from destruction; I, Aramida, the despised, have gathered him from the dust and have brought him to thee whole.'

She stumbled once or twice, and then staggered forward, with her head drooped and her breathing laboured. But for the effort she made on account of the child, she would have sunk to the ground. The blood from her torn bosom trickled over his naked limbs.

Frightened by the unusual manner in which

he was being carried, the child uttered a plaintive cry—a cry which was as the signal of her doom.

Men and women of the leather-tanner class, who had gazed on, dismayed and motionless, during the child's peril, were roused suddenly to action. One woman—the mother—rushed forward and wrenched the baby from Aramida's arms. And from a dozen throats there broke the sudden horrible cry :

'The string-weaver! the widow! the witch! With her blood she has woven a spell upon the child! Stone her! Stone her!'

Aramida cowered back. Her arms, roughly deprived of their sacred burden, fell empty to her sides, and she raised her face with a piteous look of supplication.

The savage cry was repeated in a greater number of voices :

'Stone her! Stone her!'

'Have mercy!' she shrieked, wringing her hands in terror. 'Spare me! I am already sorely wounded. Increase not my suffering! Indeed—indeed I meant not any harm! Spare me! Spare me!'

Her voice incensed the mob, and there uprose again and again the merciless shout :

'Stone her! Stone her!'

Her screams for mercy were drowned in the

uproar, and, frenzied with despair, she glared wildly round at her tormentors.

Uttering a cruel jibe, a boy picked up a handful of sand and threw it in her face; another spat upon her naked feet; and more vehement became the fury-rousing clamour:

‘Stone her! She has held in her accursed arms a woman’s child! Stone her! She has contaminated his body with her accursed blood! Stone her! She has dampened his skin with her abominable breath! Stone her! Stone her!’

A small flint was hurled at her. It was the signal for the attack. Like hell-hounds the men, women, and children crowded round her. From all directions stones were cast at her: one struck her mouth, another gashed her brow; yet another deepened the horn-wound in her breast. She writhed in agony, avoiding one stone but to feel the stinging cut of another. And all the time she heard the blood-curdling shout of her persecutors repeating the hoarse refrain:

‘Stone her! Stone her! The widow! The witch!’

In her torture she dropped down upon her knees and joined her hands in agonized supplication.

‘I saved the child!’ she shrieked. ‘Have mercy upon me! Have mercy upon me!’

A low-born boy, who was near enough to distinguish her words, smote her lacerated bosom with a thorny stick.

'Silence, O thou!' he yelled; 'but for thy unlucky presence danger would not have pursued the little one!'

His words were chorused by the jeering rabble, and the disdainful appellation was groaned out at her:

'O thou! O thou!'

A hail of flint struck her body and added to the jaggedness of her wounds. Cut and bruised from head to foot, and with the storm of stones thickening round her, she twisted herself about in anguish, looking scarcely human in her violent contortions.

Again her voice rang out with desperate entreaty.

'Have pity! Let me not be stoned to death! See how I suffer! Have pity—have pity!'

It was the piercing cry of one in direful torment, a cry of uttermost human despair and pain.

None pitied her. Her cry was drowned in the jibes of her torturers. Thicker and faster fell the missiles which struck her flesh with a sickening thud—thicker and faster, until she was beaten down beneath the pelting shower. Out of her forehead oozed narrow, red streams

that trickled over her eyes and dropped, like tears of blood, upon the scattered stones.

From among the crowd not one fellow-creature would respond compassionately to her agonized appeal. Not one would lift a voice to save her—not one would stay a hand against her.

Fainter and fainter grew her cries of agony, until they faded away in a gasping, gurgling moan. No longer could she make herself heard through the fierce clamour. Her lips were cut and swollen; her mouth was full of blood; rigor-attended pangs opened the wounds in her flesh, and quivered through all her smitten frame. Her once colourless garment was red-dappled, and was wet where it was red. Her hair was dishevelled, and fell in blood-befouled locks over her shoulders. Her drapery, rent and displaced by her contortions, no longer afforded the covering requisite to decency.

But Aramida was beyond sensitiveness to physical shame. Already the sweat of death was beading her brow; already an awful numbness was enveloping her limbs; she had passed the extremity of her torture, and there remained nothing for her now but the half-consciousless, exterminatory throe in which she would change from the quick to the dead.

By the dregs of the villagers she had been lynched, and her sin had been that she had saved the life of a child, had received on her bosom the hurt which would have killed him.

To the rabble who had condemned her, nothing counted except that the blood from the wound borne for the child had defiled his skin. And for her self-sacrificing deed she had been beaten down with stones until her forehead pressed the earth, until strength was stricken from her body, until her cries for mercy were choked in her own blood, until she knew nothing but the agony which assailed her flesh.

While she lay thus, a man, by trade a leather-worker, hurled upon her a last stone, and the boy who had taunted her with her lucklessness struck her again with his stick of thorns.

Then it was that a merciful voice made itself heard above the subsiding uproar — Asta's voice, clear, passionate, penetrating.

‘Torturers! Raise not another stone against the woman! Since the casting of the first flint, I have called, unheard through the clamour, that such cowardly persecution might cease!’

The mob looked up and saw Asta standing on the parapet of the roof, her arms held out to their greatest width, her slim, draped figure outlined, like a cross, against the blue sky.

‘Take heed, cruel stoners!’ she continued, ‘lest for the wrong wrought upon the woman this house shall fall and crush your bodies beneath its walls.’

A sudden silence followed her speech. Quelled by a superstitious fear that her words might, with the aid of the gods, bring down the edifice, the men, women, and children drew back, and laid aside sullenly the stones they had gathered up in readiness for a second attack, should the woman rise and seek to avenge herself.

‘For,’ they muttered suspiciously among themselves, ‘she may be feigning this weakness to disarm us, possessing as she does the craft of a witch.’

Asta, who had witnessed with horror the swift, terrible scene, remembered nothing in connection with Aramida except that, at risk of her own safety, the maltreated woman had saved a defenceless baby from being trampled to death. No one else had rushed forward at the critical moment ; no one else had stretched forth a rescuing hand. Aramida alone had snatched the child from his peril, and had held him out of harm’s way. And for her deed of courage ruthless hands had been raised against her ; she had been spat upon ; she had been pronounced accursed, and had been cursed

anew; she had been pelted piteously with stones, and had been forced to taste the trickling blood which sprang from the widening wounds on her face !

All Asta's feelings revolted against the ingratitude, the injustice, the cruelty. She saw further than tradition taught, deeper than superstition pointed. In the butted, bruised, stone-beaten woman she detected widowhood, not as a sin, but as a grievous burden; she saw wedded childlessness no longer as an iniquity, but as a pitiable source of heart-hunger and lonely suffering. She had witnessed the yearning love with which Aramida had sheltered on her torn breast the helpless baby; and Asta had seen the widow's grief-lined face transfigured, tranquillized, as though the mere touch of a little child had transferred her to a realm of glory.

For the desolate string-weaver, a great compassion had throbbed into Asta's heart, and, appalled at the pitilessness of the mob, she had sprung upon the edge of the parapet, where she could be seen, and by her repeated efforts had at last succeeded in making her voice heard above the horrible din.

In the silence produced by her appearance, her voice again rang forth :

'Cowards! Leave the woman free! Any-

body who offers her further molestation does so at peril of instant punishment! Let the string-weaver go her way in peace!’

‘Tis the zemindar’s daughter who gives us speech,’ several of the villagers muttered, ‘the lord-zemindar, on whose land our huts are built, and who might, if we displeased him, banish us from our present homes. The zemindar was ever a proud lord, and one to set unusual value by his daughter.’

The cruel crowd, longing to hurl at Aramida another shower of stones, slunk away from her, many of the women grinding their heels into the dust with impotent rage.

‘She saved the child!’ Asta cried out from the housetop. ‘She delivered the child from death! For her deed, all noble as it was, let men respect her, and women deal kindly by her, and children praise her! No longer is her life valueless to the people of earth. She saved a child!’

There arose a sullen groan from the mob, and vindictive looks were cast upon the persecuted woman, but nobody dared raise a hand against her.

Aramida had heard the sweet, clear voice, the pitiful words which had commended the brow-beaten widow to men’s respect, to women’s kindness, and to the love of little children.

From among her fellow-creatures one had stood forth and had spoken in her defence ; from the unsympathetic, jeering, cruel throng, one had shown her compassion ; one had said that the long-worthless life had ceased to be valueless ; one had acknowledged the debt of the baby's well-being ; one had urged that, because she had saved a child, she should by children be praised.

Aramida raised slowly from the ground her blood-streaked face. She dragged herself to a kneeling posture, and with her half-blind eyes gazed upward at Asta—upward through the dazzling sunlight, at the slender, fair-robed girl poised on the parapet ; and the luminant expression which had transfigured the string-weaver's face when, for a few moments, she had felt the child's velvety embrace about her throat and breast, shed its glory once more over her pain-swollen features. . . . But how strangely the daylight bewildered her ! What a vague dreaminess droused her eyelids ! And a sweet, soft sound, like dew dropping upon lotus-flowers, filled her ears. What tender balm the sound diffused, for in the dew-drops she could hear children's voices whispering—whispering :

‘Praise be to Aramida the saver of a child !’

To her glorified gaze the street and the houses became merged in a meadow of silvered

lilies, and she was conscious of a gentle falling of sweet, moist leaves all about her. . . . No; they were not leaves, they were baby-footsteps; they had never followed her along her life's narrow, pit-beset passage; but now they were coming very close—very close. . . . And her own feet were so tired, so cruelly torn they could no longer tread the broken way. . . . Yet she could hear the dimpling sound of the children's soft-dropping steps. . . . Nearer—nearer they came. . . . Now she could feel the tiny feet pattering like dewdrops over her riven breast—pattering into her heart. . . . But the sun-glitter above blinded her, numbed her. . . . She must close her stone-bruised, blood-blurred eyes; she must cover herself up from the torpifying rays, and shut away from herself everything except the tender footsteps within her heart—her life-wearied heart that was stilling its dull throb to listen to the patter of the dew-pearled feet, the velvet tread of the little children who had come to wander with her along the forgotten way of love. . . . But she was very cold—very numb, and under her the ground seemed to rock as with an earthquake. . . . Still she could hear the children whispering:

‘Praise be to Aramida, the safe-keeper of a child!’

She—Aramida—had not lived in vain, had not suffered in vain; she had saved a child. . . . And the little, mist-robed children were beckoning her along their pearly way—their dew-crystalled, twilight way. . . . How softly from the misty twilight they called! How divinely sweet sounded their voices! . . . Hark! the whisper had become a thousand-voiced chant:

‘Come, Aramida—come in peacefulness, O saver of a child!’

And she felt so tired—so benumbed . . . so thankful for the peaceful way. . . .

Slowly, with trembling, bleeding hands, she drew a fragment of her sullied drapery over her face—the face that, disfigured by violence, strained by suffering, damp with the gathering chill of death, was tranquillized by an expression of unspeakable contentment, of ineffable peace, which neither earth-stain nor blood-stain could cover with sordidness. She swayed and dropped sideways until she lay cramped and shrouded, silent and motionless, upon the roadway.

No more would she be harassed by the mocking shout of her revilers; no more would she be wounded by the pitiless aim of her torturers. By man and beast she had been injured unto death . . . and she was dead. . . .

A few from the crowd wondered at the peaceful smile which, at the last, they had seen upon her face—her face which, throughout the years of her tribulation, had never worn a smile or changed its look of harsh endurance.

A gentle-looking boy named Lilar, a goat-herd, who, while piping soft notes on a reed, had been hustled, late, to the scene, and had taken no part in the cruel stoning, withdrew his gaze solemnly from the pulseless form, and, heaving a sigh, put his reed away in his vesture.

‘It was as though she had drawn near to the Very Light of all the Lights!’ he whispered, raising his hands in awe, and with wonder-widened eyes gazing skyward.

A decrepit hunchbacked miser, whose limbs were hideously dwarfed, and shaking with old age, heard the words, and seeing the rapt expression on the boy's face, uttered a wheezy laugh that was full of senile malice.

Cease, puny driveller!’ he croaked, dashing his feeble fist in Lilar's face. ‘For such as she was, there is no Light!’

Weeping and solitary, Lilar turned away, and went from the crowd, while the age-wizen hunchback continued his hissing laughter, until it was smothered in a hideous spasmodic sound between a cough and a cackle. Even then, as

he rubbed his gnarled hands together in evil exultation, he jerked out the words :

‘ For such carrion—no Light ! no Light ! ’

The bare, string-strung bedstead of unlacquered wood, on which, for years, Aramida had lain throughout the lonely hours of the night, was brought from the hut in which for years she had laboured through the dull hours of the day.

Several women whose low birth permitted them to touch the dead, raised the shrouded form and, placing it upon the bed, bore it to a remote corner of the village, where was situated the hut which had been the string-weaver’s home. At the threshold they put down the bedstead with its lifeless freight.

To keep herself from starving, to pay the rent of the mud-walled hovel, which, for the greater part of her life, had sheltered her from sun and rain, Aramida had toiled as a string-weaver, wearing her fingers almost to the bones to obtain a paltry pittance. Despised, hated, hunted, cursed, she had endured her hours of hungry fasting, her days of bitter labour, her nights of hopeless anguish, her years of meagre existence—tormented, aching, sick at heart.

Now there was no more need for her hands to labour. She had no more need for food, no

more need for shelter against sun or storm. Neither pestilence nor famine could affect her, nor drought nor flood affright her. She had bitten her last bite of bread, had swallowed her last pinch of salt, had drunk her last drop of water, and, tranquil at last, she had slipped away from the sorrows of the world, causing by her departure no pang of human grief, no sob of human regret, no fall of a human tear. Women standing by said that she had ‘died in the gutter as she deserved to die’—that was all.

There was but one living thing to humbly mourn her death. From behind some dust-covered bushes near by a pariah-dog crept along almost on its stomach, striving with dumb timorousness to keep under cover until the hut was reached. Shivering with fear, the animal shrunk up to the doorway, stole to and fro with its tail between its legs, sniffed the air, and then put its fore-paws timidly on the bed on which lay the stiffening body of Aramida. The forlorn creature gazed with wistful, miserable eyes at the shrouded form and whimpered dismally.

It was only a prowling pariah-dog; but on scorching days of drought the woman now lying dead had poured into the hollow of a stone water that the animal might drink; only

a half-starved, cringing hound, ownerless hunted, kicked, and driven with stones and sticks from the haunts of men; but daily, with dumb appeal, it had come famished to the string-weaver's lowly door, and had been thrown a few fragments from the thin cakes of unleavened bread, which, with a small jar of water, had formed Aramida's one daily meal—bread earned in affliction, broken in bitterness, eaten in solitude, and shared with a spurned and wandering dog.

Yet the dog had been grateful, and had guarded her door with furtive fidelity; and now crawling with instinctive understanding upon the bed, the faithful beast laid its fore-paws across the dead woman's feet and uttered a long, loud, melancholy howl.

Immediately, through the lull which had followed the discovery of Aramida's death, there broke from the stragglers of the rabble an outcry of angry superstition:

'The witch-dog, the snarler that made protest, and showed its fangs when the widow's empty bed was carried out. Drive the snarler off! Drive the snarler off!'

A boy, by trade a hide-drier, who happened to be carrying a rope, flung it viciously round the dog's neck, and dragged the terrified creature into the middle of the narrow street.

‘What is to be done with the starveling?’ the boy asked of those in greater authority.

‘Let it be stripped alive of its hide!’ shouted the man who had cast both the first and the last stone at Aramida.

‘Harm not the unwilling brute!’ another man commanded in a harsh, jibing voice. ‘Let it be chained outside the village, and left without food and water until by natural cause the cur shall perish.’

‘Yea, yea!’ shouted the others. ‘So shall no man’s hand be made unclean by contact with the death-howler.’

The cowering, panting animal, already half strangled, was dragged along, while the on-lookers made sport of its terror. A fragment of rusty iron—a discarded horseshoe picked up from a rubbish heap—was sent whizzing through the air. The missile, thrown mercilessly, fell mercifully, and penetrated a vital spot on the dog’s head. The poor beast rolled over on its side, and was drawn along with the rope for a couple of yards; then the dog was seen to be without life.

The boy at once dropped the rope.

‘As with the woman, the moment had come for the dog to die,’ he said. ‘None meant to kill it, even as none meant to kill the string-weaver. It was time for their

lives to go out, and so their lives have gone out.'

The women carried within the hut the bed with its silent burden, and the straggling crowd dispersed, each man going his accustomed way.

Aramida's end was attributed to the butt from the buffalo, and for what had happened no blame was attached to anyone who had witnessed the string-weaver's death. It had been her time to die, and she had died. That was the villagers' verdict, and no question was raised as to its verity.

Of one thing they were certain: their eyes would be troubled no more by the widow's grief-furrowed face and work-wearied form. Young mothers and anxious wives no longer feared that her shadow might fall their way, or they might tread unconsciously in her foot-track. No more would she walk in their midst, nor would the dust of the road receive again the print of her naked feet. Her eyes had taken their last ray of light from the sun; her lips had inhaled their last fill of breath from the air; her body had thrown its last moving shadow upon the earth. . . . She was no longer of the world.

And Aramida? Nevermore would she be harrowed by the fearful sound of the world's

children crying: 'The gods preserve us from the baneful presence of Aramida! Let her not look upon us with her dismal eyes, nor approach us with her lonely shadow. Hide us from the misfortune-weaver, Aramida the banned! Aramida the evil-starred! Aramida the curst!'

In the stillness that encompassed her, the crucifying cry of scorn and aversion, of malignity and detestation, had been hushed. No earthly sound could disturb the profound tranquillity in which she had gained repose. Her body, bent with toil, torn in excruciation, had found rest; her spirit, heavy laden with sorrow, had found peace. By death released from her sordid bondage, she had passed from the world of human life and from the anguish of human existence, to feel no more the piercing pangs of human persecution.

CHAPTER VII

THE CRIMSON SIGN

ALTHOUGH Vanita summoned Asta down from the roof several times, and endeavoured to persuade her to rest in a room sheltered from the sun, the girl contrived to spend the greater part of the morning on the housetop, peeping through the square openings in the parapet, and hoping to catch a glimpse of Nara as he approached the dwelling.

She did not doubt that he would keep his word; and as the sun rose higher, and the crimson flowers at her bosom and in her hair faded, she replaced the drooping blooms by fresh ones. On Nara's account she had on a snowy robe adorned with a pale mauve embossed pattern that appeared here and there among the folds. On the day on which he had seen her for the first time she had been in white apparel, and she desired to appear as fair in his eyes as on that occasion when she had been unconscious of his admiring gaze.

At length she was rewarded by seeing him

approach, astride a white horse—a red-bridled steed that in her sight seemed suited to bear a prince; and to her Nara was a prince of princes.

Before he was near enough for her to distinguish his features, she had recognized him by his emerald-hued tunic and the scarlet *du-shala* with which he was scarfed.

She stood up, and leaned as far over the parapet as she could bend without danger of overbalancing herself. Would he look up and see her? She dared not call out to him, for fear of attracting the attention of anybody within the house, or of some one else passing along the street.

By this time he was close enough for her to discern his handsome features; but he did not once raise his eyes to the roof. He reined up in front of the door, and a few moments afterwards she knew he was being received by Rukmin.

With her heart beating wildly, she resumed her half-recumbent attitude behind the parapet. Would her father consent to Nara's proposal? Would the claim of Almos be set aside in favour of this new suitor? The suspense was almost unbearable, and she strained her ears for the slightest sound which might give her some clue as to what was transpiring. Hours

seemed to pass, although the sun appeared to have stood still, so short a distance had it mounted since Nara had ridden to the doorway.

A clatter of the horse's hoofs made her start up and once more lean over the parapet. Nara had left the house, and, but for the sudden rearing of his horse as it was being led forward for him to mount, he might have ridden away without lifting his glance in her direction. The short delay caused by the animal's prancing gave Asta time to snatch from her perfumed hair the crimson hibiscus flower. She flung it so that it fell before Nara's eyes. Gazing upward in the direction from whence it had dropped, he saw her leaning over the parapet, her sweet face alight with joy. Between her parted veil, he caught the glow of the blossom at her breast, and a swift fire leaped into his eyes, making them for one instant blaze like torches. Quickly, as though he feared they might betray him, he lowered over them his lash-shadowed eyelids. Seizing the bridle in a masterly grip, he mounted the restive horse and, with an inscrutable expression on his features, galloped away.

Asta watched him until he was out of sight. Then she looked wistfully at the crushed and almost dust-buried flower upon which his horse

had trampled. For, being too discreet to pick up the flower, Nara had purposely ridden on it, lest, lying in its freshness, it should have been snatched up by any rough hands. Asta wondered what had passed between Nara and her father. She felt herself trembling from head to foot with the tumult of joy, fear, and suspense. Knowing she would discover nothing by remaining on the roof, she at once descended the narrow steps which led within the house, and joined Vanita in the dairy, where there was a delicious odour of spiced milk. Vanita was engaged in taking daintily from a shining brass platter some freshly-made ghee, which, with a view to storing it for medicinal purposes, she was about to put into small jars, to be hermetically closed for several years, until the contents, mellowed by age, would possess the healing qualities of a pure ointment, to be used, when required, as a household remedy for skin-wounds. When Asta entered the dairy, Vanita refrained from glancing up from her work.

'You have been a long while on the roof,' she remarked, continuing her task.

'Not too long a while,' Asta replied softly. 'I have news for you—such delightful news!'

'Of what nature?' Vanita asked.

'Of the nature of—picture in your mind our rescuer of yesterday!' Asta exclaimed.

'Nay, pearl, my mind reflects the image of no man save my own husband.'

'It is well to say that!' Asfa said, her voice almost lost in a sigh of exquisite tenderness. 'My mind also has become a mirror to hold only my dear lord's likeness—a likeness glowing with kingly colours, and lit up by eyes that shine like star-bright torch-fires.'

Comprehending the words only too well, Vanita feigned misunderstanding.

'Clearly you carry in your heart the face of Almos,' she said. 'It was thus I saw him in my dream.'

Asta made a gesture of impatience, stamping upon the floor her little, bare, rose-tinted foot.

'Was he who came yesterday to our assistance Almos?' she asked scornfully.

'From his own lips we heard that he was not.'

'He spoke as a truth-teller. It is Nara's image that is in my heart—Nara's image that my heart will hold in faithfulness till the end of my life!'

'Faithfulness has never yet sprung out of faithlessness,' Vanita remarked. 'Think of Hiran's son, even now, perhaps, released from captivity, and making his way, with painful speed, along the rough mountain-passes, yearn-

ing to approach near enough to behold as his beacon the fires of our village.'

'I can think only of the princely son of Zarrin.'

'To what end, misguided child?'

'That I may be ever happy, and know myself ever blessed,' Asta said, with sudden meekness, drawing her hands together as in prayer.

'It is not through him that you will acquire happiness and blessing, for out of ill good cannot come.'

'Is it ill to take the sweetness that the gods have sent? Is it ill to clothe with the rosiness of joy my naked heart? Is it ill to profess love where I can be loving, obedience where I can obey, gladness where I can be glad?'

'I have said,' Vanita replied, with undisturbed calmness.

With swift passion, Asta opened her hands and extended them in protestation.

'You desire me to devote my life to a weary waiting for the return of Almos, who may be dead! You wish me to cover with a death-garment the ineffable rose-glory which has suffused my heart! You would bid me turn from the golden smile of the gods and fold round my life the sombre cloak of the accursed! Such is your teaching. Hear, now, the teaching of my heart! If Hiran's son lives—if he

should return, I would sooner wrap myself in a disc -infected, death-contaminated covering taken from a plague-corpse, than don for him a wedding-garment! For my heart is as heavy with revolt against the son of Hiran as it is great with adoration for the son of Zarrin, and to the son of Zarrin only will I go in marriage.'

'What folly is this?' Vanita asked, glancing round in fear lest the girl's words should be overheard.

'It is no folly!' Asta exclaimed, letting her arms fall to her sides, while she dropped her face to hide the warm glow she felt in her cheeks.

'Alas! What manner of wisdom can it be?' Vanita murmured.

'The wisdom of love,' Asta said; 'the wisdom that comes to those who love and know themselves beloved by those they adore.'

'Such wisdom should not be yours!'

'Such wisdom is mine, and I rejoice in its possession. Ah, mother, did it never come to you?'

'I knew it not until I was happy wife.'

Asta sighed. Then her lips curved with a dreamy smile.

'The gods have been kinder to me,' she said, her eyes full of joy-light; 'they have vouch-

safed to me a glimpse of the earthly paradise I am to know when I am Nara's wife.'

'Make not too sure,' Vanita replied; 'I cannot but have faith in my own visions.'

'And what does my father say?'

'Concerning Hiran's son?'

'No—concerning the son of Zarrin.'

'To me my lord has not mentioned Zarrin's son.'

'Have you heard nothing from which you could have drawn a conclusion—a happy conclusion?'

'Nothing tending either to happiness or to sorrow.'

'But Nara was in this house not half an hour ago.'

'So I was informed.'

'And you know on what errand he came?'

Vanita was silent.

Scarcely able to repress her eagerness, Asta seized her mother's hands.

'Tell me—tell me the result of his visit!' she exclaimed. 'I must know; my heart is on fire with suspense!'

'Turn, then, your thoughts to Almos.'

'I cannot! If you know anything of Nara's success, do not keep it from me. You must have drawn your conclusions from different signs—the tone of a voice, the hastiness or

the slowness of a footstep, the summoning of a servant—a dozen trifling circumstances. Tell me what you heard.'

Vanita shook her head.

'I was too busy to heed the stranger's coming and going,' she said, 'and the noise of the churning-sticks kept from my ears all other sounds. Besides which, my mind was preoccupied with other thoughts.'

'I must know! I must know!' Asta cried, pacing to and fro with restless steps. 'Even now I will seek my father and beg the information from him.'

She would have carried her words into action had not Vanita interfered.

'Stay!' Vanita exclaimed, detaining her with gentle firmness; 'it is not for you or for me to question or to pry into an affair that is withheld from us. What is for our ears will come to them without our seeking, and what is intended for us not to hear, we should never force to our hearing. Be patient. In good time we shall doubtless know the reason and the result of Nara's visit.'

Asta knew the soundness of Vanita's advice. A moment's reflection convinced the girl that her father would tell her nothing he wished her not to know. If he treated the matter with silence, it would be a silence she would have

to accept unquestionably. Any rebellion on her part would probably terminate in the curtailment of the amount of freedom she was already allowed, and in her perpetual banishment from the housetop, from which she was wont to take her view of life.

So she sat down forlornly on a step near the open door and clasped her arms round her knees. Outside, close to the doorway, was her favourite flower-bed with its sun-gilt marigolds glaring like fire-buds in the brilliant daylight. She fixed upon them a gaze that saw not their burning gold. Perceiving only the scene which filled her inward vision, she beheld, as in a dream, a crushed red flower lying on a dusty road, and a proud-seated horseman galloping out of sight along the dust-trailed way.

'Why did my beloved destroy the flower?' she mused. 'It was not that the sign I sent down to him was unwelcome, or he would not have given me so tender a glance before departing.'

She was roused from her reverie by the voice of Vanita, who, having made the pots of ghee ready for the store-cupboard, had left the dairy hurriedly at a summons from Rukmin. After a few moments she had returned with a doleful expression on her face.

'Pearl,' she said, 'sad news has come to this house.'

Asta started, and her eyes betokened anxiety.

'Not in connection with Nara?' she exclaimed, with a painful catch in her voice.

'No,' Vanita said; 'the news refers to others, and comes from Putri. Sickness has entered the house of your father's brother Raudra.'

'On whom has the illness fallen?'

'On your cousin Gondal. He was always weak in health; and the disease, so it is reported, has laid him very low.'

'What manner of disease?' Asta asked.

'The dreaded plague—the virulent malady which has thinned so many cities and exterminated so many families, seizing alike for its prey the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the good and the evil.'

Asta shuddered.

'May Dehra Doon never be affected by the foul contagion!' she exclaimed solemnly.

'We of the Doon must be prepared to face with fortitude the deadly distemper, for we know not when or how it may come,' Vanita said. 'Already the sickness has crept into Putri, and poor Gondal is stricken with the scourge.'

'Has his sister Kameena escaped the pestilential influence?' Asta asked.

'Fortunately, yes; and being well, Kameena has been taken to a place of safety. But the

messenger from Putri City relates that Gondal's mother refuses to leave him, and remains at his bedside, weeping and tending him in his time of dreadful debilitation.'

'How does my uncle bear the trouble?'

'He, too, remains in sorrow tending his son; but Gondal's condition is such that he is unconscious of his parents' devotion.'

'And Gondal's young wife?'

'She no longer exists on earth. One trouble brings another, and in bemoaning as an expectant mother Gondal's plight, she brought forth too soon a son. Her passing away was a state of happiness, for she lived through the sweet pangs of childbirth to die in the bliss of beholding her first-born child.'

'Tis a woeful state of affairs,' Asta exclaimed, 'and I am most grieved that Gondal's wife is dead.'

'Nay, child, she gives no cause for grief,' Vanita said; 'she died happy, and all who die happy are in the guardianship of the Shining Ones. It is a reward of virtue; for, a single moment of bliss, at the extremity of life, disperses manifold sorrows, and brings greater contentment than a lifetime of pleasure which has for its end one final moment of terrifying regret.'

'I think if I could live happily I could die

happily,' Asta observed, with a note of wistfulness in her voice.

'Much depends upon the source from which the happiness is derived,' Vanita replied; and then she added metaphorically: 'Happiness is a turbulent stream. If the tide flows from a pure spring, and continues in an uncontaminated course, even the lowest ebb will be sweet and bright and full of refreshment; but if the current has pollution at its fountain-head, and runs in an unclean way, the last evil-odoured wave will be fouled with noxious dregs, and made poisonous with its own mire.'

'That sounds like one of the Lady Brinda's many parables,' Asta said. 'But who, seeing a white stream and a black one side by side, would drink from the black one?'

'When we are parched with thirst, and the black stream seems nearest, we may be tempted to drink of the evil water.'

'No, mother dear, you and I will never bring to ourselves the noxious dregs,' Asta asserted. 'You have chosen your stream, and it is a clean one, and runs in a fair channel. As for myself, you and the Lady Brinda have given me such great knowledge of good, that I know where the brightest water is always to be found. But tell me more about my cousin

Gondal. How many days has he had the perilous fever ?

‘To-day is the fourth day, although until last evening his ailment was thought to be merely a lung disturbance, brought on through unusual coldness of the weather, as up to that time no buboes were seen to swell upon him.’

‘Does he know that his son is born ?’

‘The news was conveyed to him just as he was losing consciousness, and before he could be informed that his wife was dead his senses deserted him.’

‘The report of the plague visitation to my uncle’s house is indeed dreadful news,’ Asta said. ‘I hope no other of his household will be attacked by the pestilence.’

On the following morning sadder tidings were conveyed to Rukmin. Gondal had perished during the night, and the bubonic plague, from which he had suffered, having been especially contagious as well as deadly, his father and mother in tending him had contracted the more rapidly fatal pestis siderons, and both had died within fifteen hours of the onset of the symptoms. With the latter tidings had come word that Gondal’s infant son was thriving, and, with Kameena, was safely away from the contaminated area.

Mourning the loss of his brother, Rukmin

went to Putri to arrange matters that needed his attention, and to bring back with him Kameena and the orphan baby, that they might receive the shelter of his house, and have the protection he could give them. Out of consideration for the present members of his household, he resolved to take every possible precaution against contagion, and to avoid localities in which cases of plague were known to have occurred. It was a melancholy journey upon which to set forth, but he was not one to shirk his duty. Summoning his eldest son, Raban, from the district to take charge of the zemindary, and sending for an elderly female relative to come and stay in the house, Rukmin instructed Vanita how to act while he was absent, which might be for a week. He then rode without unnecessary delay to the railway-station, and left by the first train that could convey him towards his destination.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILKEN THREAD

DURING Rukmin's absence, Asta contrived to spend, by herself, portions of each day on the house-top, where she could look through the square apertures in the parapet, and watch the people passing to and fro in the street. And every day Nara rode by on his white steed. Sometimes she would catch sight of him in the mistiness of early morning; more often he would appear in the twilight of evening; and always at those hours she watched eagerly for his approach, and as he neared she raised herself by stepping up and setting her small feet between the reticulated brickwork, in which position she was able to lean over the parapet, with her veil parted from her face, that he might see the look of welcome in her eyes. At such times she lowered on a slender line of spun-silk a fragrant flower-bud, which he broke off and retained in his possession.

With what joy-sparkled eyes she watched him! With what loving eyes she smiled his

way! And how full seemed the throb of her heart! how soft the curve of her veiled bosom!

Nara always felt the blood course quicker in his veins when he gazed upward at her, and caught an unhindered view of her expressive face. It was a face full of sweet witchery, a warm, passion-inspiring face—the face that, before he had known to whom it belonged, had flashed, like a meteor, through his dreams, and had shone star-like in his waking visions.

He had found Asta entrancing when he had first seen her carrying, in girlish serenity, her offering of flowers to the sacred stream, while she chanted meekly her words of praise. Then she had been unaware of his glance, unmindful that a gentle breeze had parted her veil, revealing her features in their innocent passivity. Now her beauty possessed for him an added fascination. He had detected the force of a subtle magnetism, a vivid understanding between her and himself. She was no longer passive, no longer content to pass him by in the calm of her virginity. She had returned look for look, heart-throb for heart-throb, longing for longing, and the quickened vitality of her emotion was manifest to him.

‘I wish I could as easily drop down to your caress,’ she thought, when, on the fifth day, she lowered a red rose on the silken thread. And

as he crushed the petals in his fingers, the unuttered words burned through his mind :

‘ Would that you could thus quickly come to my possession !’

His pulses throbbed tumultuously with the fervour of his passion. In her eyes, on her lips, in her outstretched hands, he read the response to his silently expressed desire, and he craved to be able to catch her in his arms, and to ride away with her, without waiting for the many ceremonies which would have to be gone through before he could otherwise claim her for his own.

With regard to his interview with Rukmin, the latter had ignored the proposition which had been made to him in connexion with Asta. During Nara's visit, Rukmin had conversed on other subjects, but on the one subject he remained invincibly silent.

Nara consoled himself with the thought that he had not received a distinct refusal to his request, and he buoyed himself up with the hope that there was a possibility of a successful termination to his suit. Above everything else, it was necessary for him to keep in Rukmin's favour, and on this account Nara was careful not to act in any way which might be discreditable to himself. Yet each day made him more passionately determined that

Asta should be his ; each day seemed to draw her nearer to him, and to find her heart closer to his heart. In the touch of the flower she lowered to him in the twilight he felt the contact of her small, soft hand, and during those moments in which he passed beneath the parapet his spirit and hers seemed to meet while their hearts throbbed as with one pulsation ; and in each mind the thought, revealed by some tense bond of sympathy, was known to the other.

Every time Asta drew up the silken thread, she pressed to her breast the end from which he had taken the flower, and he, glancing back as he rode away, witnessed the action with satisfaction. He knew that because his hand had touched the silk, she had placed it against her bosom.

He grew feverishly impatient for Rukmin's return, although so much was at stake and depended upon his decision.

Nara was aware that if his second application should meet with a verbal repulse, he would experience greater difficulty in seeing Asta, and the thread of silk would no longer be a means of communication between them. Even now he had to be careful lest anyone on guard should detect his upward glance, or notice the suspended flower ; and he knew by

intuition that Asta always peeped through the narrow openings in the parapet before she climbed up to his view and cast the silken line.

‘I shall endeavour to win her in honour,’ he decided within himself; ‘but if that becomes impossible Asta shall choose between her father’s word and my will—his law and my love.’

A slight smile twitched his lips as the sentence framed itself in his mind, for he felt certain as to the direction in which Asta would lean should she be driven to make the choice. She would not ignore him. He knew that it was part of a woman’s destiny to obey the impassioned call of man, and in this case the call was imperative, rousing her to give a warm response, and to yield herself to him in unquestioning obedience. While making her decision, she would on one side be tempted by the glow and softness of a voluptuous enthrallment; on the other side she would be repelled by the harshness of a stringent discipline, and a rigorous, penitential seclusion. In her expanding youthfulness she would follow the dictates of Nature; she would turn to him, as a growing flower to the sun, and the sweet tendrils of her life would twine, unconsciously, in his direction. She would be controlled by the ardour of his love, like a flower swayed by the sun’s warmth.

How easy would it be to substitute for the slender thread of silk a substantial rope of flax, to secure it to the parapet from which Asta—so frail in form, so light in weight—could descend in safety, and come, like a dropped rose, to his possession ! She would not withhold herself from him any more than she withheld the bud that each day she guided down to his hand ; for, to a woman, wrapped in the blush of her early beauty, there was no power on earth more potent than the tenderness of a man's passion.

So far his happiness was assured. Yet this consciousness was immediately followed by a pang of remorse, as he remembered the lovely, tranquil look which had been on Asta's face when he first caught sight of her. It was her expression of reposeful innocence which had awakened his admiration, making her so fair in his eyes, so desirable to his heart.

He asked himself if he could be content to strip her of her purity, to cause her to hide, degraded and ashamed, from her people, while she would be an outcast to all save his passion. He might snatch her to himself ; he might let her lay the rose of her life at his feet, but if he had to stoop to raise the flower, if it should be soiled with specks of defiling dust, would he feel pride in its possession—would it be to him

a source of unalloyed sense-delight? He coveted Asta in her irreproachableness. Could he be satisfied to see her degraded, even though her degradation came through him? He wanted the rose, but he desired that the dew and the fragrance upon it should be unspoiled. He wanted Asta, but he desired that she should go faultlessly to him, and with every blessing attending her. For how could prosperity attend one who honoured not her parents? Through his mind ran the wistful words:

‘Little love! if only you could come to me, graced with your many virtues, that are like a string of perfect pearls, each one, though all are equal, seeming fairest!’

He could not bear to think that she might bring upon herself the curse of disobedience. And yet if her father refused his consent?

Nara's blood surged in a hot wave through his veins, and he clenched his teeth. Come what might, he would not renounce Asta. He would take her, if with his sword he had to cut a way for her escape. She should acknowledge but one claim upon her obedience—the supreme claim put forward by the god of love and by all-governing Nature.

Yet at daybreak, when he bowed himself in reverence before the rising sun, his soul was full of humility, and as he watched the up-

springing rays spread a web of light over the night-darkness, he acknowledged his own inferiority, and prayed that the heaviness might be removed from his heart, and benevolence might be vouchsafed to him so that he might walk ever in the path of the just.

On the seventh evening, as he rode slowly past Rukmin's house, Asta made a sign to him by which he knew that her father had returned. She then withdrew quickly from sight, without dropping the accustomed flower.

'A token of danger,' Nara thought, disappointed, and he restrained himself from glancing again in the direction of the parapet.

He knew that Rukmin would not welcome him at such a time, nor did Nara want it suspected that he passed frequently that way. He would choose an appropriate hour in which to renew his suit, and, in the meantime, he would decide in what manner he could most successfully plead his cause.

'One must consider the character of the man one is to please,' he reflected, with old-world wisdom. 'I have heard that it would be well to approach with flattering discourse of himself an egotist ; with gold one should meet an avaricious man ; with hands folded in respect, an arrogant man ; with the humouring of his whims a thickskull ; and with the truth, a keen

discerner. That is sound reasoning. But how should one encounter the man who is both arrogant and discerning? In very truth, I wish this matter would come speedily to a termination, and my dear one be secure in my keeping!"

During the following two days he kept away from Rukmin's house.

It was to Nara's advantage, as well as to Asta's, not to rouse her father's suspicion or displeasure, lest by that cause the advancement of the plans in project should be retarded.

It was a test of self-control on Nara's part, and, to him, dull and void seemed the days on which he was deprived of a single moment of communication with Asta. She was the one bright star that formed the heaven of his life, and in the gloom of his self-banishment he longed passionately for the light of her countenance, which alone could dispel his darker thoughts.

He knew that she would rightly account for his non-appearance, although he was sure she would watch for him and shed tears of disappointment when he failed to pass her way.

With Asta it was as he thought. Morning and evening she crouched close to the parapet and peered through the square apertures, hoping yet dreading to see him; for now she was scarcely ever alone on the housetop.

Notwithstanding that, since Rukmin's return, Vanita's time had been devoted to the infant boy who had been made over to her care, she seemed anxious to have Asta always with her, and often when the girl watched from the roof she would turn with a start to find her mother standing at her side.

'Dearest, it is not well that you should be so much alone,' Vanita remarked on one occasion, when at her approach she saw Asta's eyes dusken with fear. 'What is up here to so greatly engage your attention?'

'Up here there is nothing but the sky above my head,' Asta faltered, hiding her eyes under their long silky lashes.

'Of a truth, pearl, but your gaze, so intent, was not fixed skywards!'

'Maybe. I heeded not in which direction my looks wandered,' Asta said, fearing lest at that moment Nara should pass. 'Come, mother dear, we will go down into the house together. Indeed, there is not much to divert one up here.'

She took Vanita's hand and led her down the steep steps, her own heart beating heavily with dread, in case she might betray her secret.

Believing that Vanita suspected nothing, Asta spent the next few hours in trying to entertain her cousin, Kameena, who, prostrated

by her bereavement, had been brought in a half-unconscious state to the house. Propped up with cushions, she was reclining in a large low swing, the ropes of which were cased in embossed silk of a turquoise tint. In the loose threads a few fresh flowers had been stuck.

Swinging drowsily to and fro, Kameena felt soothed as she watched Asta threading jasmine-blossoms for necklaces, and the invalid girl smiled feebly when she felt a chaplet of the sweet-smelling flowers being twined in her hair by her cousin.

But all the time Asta's mind was fixed upon Nara, and she longed to be in her old place behind the parapet, from which she could watch for his approach. With every flower she threaded there went to him a tender thought, and now and then her face seemed to shine as with an inward light.

She bent her head lower when she discovered that Kameena was regarding her with a despondent yet searching gaze.

'At one moment your eyes are heavy, as with tears, at another they are radiant, as with joy,' the sick girl remarked. 'What causes the change?'

'Perhaps I feel sorrowful because you are ill, and glad because of your presence here,' Asta replied evasively.

Kameena sighed, and put her hand fretfully to her hot forehead.

'I am indeed ill!' she moaned; and then, in a faltering, hollow voice, she added: 'Do you think I am likely to die?'

'Everybody alive must die,' Asta said philosophically.

'But is the weakness of my body such that I must very soon fade out of life?' Kameena whimpered, her face growing livid with fear.

'I have not heard so, nor, were such believed to be the fact, would you be kept in ignorance of the truth.'

'Then I am not dying?'

'Not to my knowledge,' Asta replied with gentleness.

A look of doubt dulled Kameena's face.

'I do not want to die!' she whispered, the words coming brokenly from her lips. 'I do not want to die—like the others!'

'Fear not,' Asta said. 'You have escaped the plague, and you are in a place of safety. Forget the terror. Your weakness is caused not by disease, but by sorrow, and when you have recovered from the pain of your bereavement, you will regain your energy, and be as if you had never been near the peril.'

Kameena felt comforted. A secret dread had been upon her that she was developing

symptoms of plague which would prove mortal, and her unspoken alarm had been awful to bear, reducing her to a state of pitiable wretchedness.

She was thankful that she had unburdened her mind, since now the horror was dispelled, and she was able to rest more at ease. She knew she had not been deceived by Asta, whose hand she held confidingly, and who took pains to prove to the sick girl her unhappy error.

'I should not stay near you if you were plague-contagioned,' Asta said conclusively. 'That fact ought to be proof enough for you.'

'I was greatly afraid,' Kameena said, 'but you have convinced me to your way of thinking, and I no longer fear the pestilence.'

Owing to unusual circumstances, Kameena was unmarried, a feud between her family and that of the man to whose son she was betrothed having prevented the alliance. But being unemotional, she had accepted her lot with a resignation that amounted to indifference, and was not troubled with misgivings as to her future. She derived comfort, too, from the knowledge that Asta was in a similar plight, and that for them both events might suddenly take a favourable turn.

CHAPTER IX

CHANDRA-HÄR

ON the third day after Rukmin's return, Nara paid him another visit, and was received with frigid courtesy within the house. As soon as the first formalities had been exchanged, Nara, standing in a dignified attitude before his host, said :

‘Sir, I have again come.’

‘So I perceive,’ Rukmin replied, his features wearing a supercilious expression.

‘Sir,’ Nara said, in a tone that was at once deferential and defiant, ‘I am here to renew my request that you will give me your daughter in marriage. I need not refer to the details into which I entered during my last visit ; you are acquainted with my birth, and with my position in life. I need only repeat that I shall prove myself to be a generous and devoted husband, should you confer upon me the favour of your daughter's hand.’

‘She is promised to another,’ Rukmin said

haughtily, after listening with politeness to Nara's speech.

Nara took half a stride forward, and then checked himself.

'To another!' he exclaimed, with a sudden scornful blaze in his eyes. 'Where is that other? What is that other? Think well, lest in keeping your daughter bound in hollow bondage you doom so sweet a lady to dishonour!'

Rukmin drew himself up with disdainful pride, and did not condescend to reply.

'It is in my power to save your sweet daughter,' Nara continued, in an impassioned voice, 'and I have come to save her.'

'From what?' Rukmin inquired, unmoved.

'From a bond that to her is like a bond of death, binding her to a man who, if not dead, is broken in caste and dragged down to the lowest depths of defilement,' Nara said.

Rukmin gave an almost imperceptible start; the supercilious expression went from his countenance, and gave place to a look of grave apprehension.

'If what you say of Almos is true, how did you gain the knowledge?'

'I could not but draw my conclusions from existing evidence,' Nara replied. 'Sir, ask yourself: "Where is Almos?"—and no answer will come. Ask yourself: "Is he caste-

broken?"—and again no answer will be forthcoming. Ask yourself: "Is he dead?"—and still you will be unanswered. For who can say into what wilderness one who is lost has wandered? How can one acknowledge himself if he be cast down into shame? How can one no longer living have voice to say: "I am dead?" Does not reason show the folly of waiting for a sign from him? If death has overtaken him, he will never return. If he is alive, he is lost and degraded beyond redemption, and it would be sacrilege to unite to him one as pure and lovely as your daughter.'

'The son of Hiran would still be true-born,' Rukmin remarked, defensively.

'Say rather, merchant-born!' Nara sneered, his nostrils quivering with scorn. 'Who is he to marry a zemindar's daughter? Since when is it not rightful for a zemindar's daughter to marry a zemindar's son?'

'In your case, since a zemindar's son has asked for a zemindar's daughter who is not free to be his wife,' Rukmin replied.

Nara clenched his hands in anger.

'She is free!' he protested. 'No man claims her, nor can she claim any man.'

'If Hiran's son lives he can claim her,' was Rukmin's calm response.

'If the merchant-born lives he shall never

claim her!' Nara retorted, in an outburst of jealous rage. 'Think you I would stand by and let her go to him?—I? By all the gods! I swear that if he comes to take her I will cut the heart out of him!'

In his passionateness Nara looked superbly handsome. His clenched hands were upflung, his head held high, and his eyes seemed to shoot out sombre flame beneath his level brows. His whole form trembled with the excess of his strong, deep feeling, and for a moment only the sound of his heavy breathing followed his words.

His potent pride appealed to Rukmin, and he regarded with keen interest the young zemindar who in his wrath looked noble, and whose features bore the stamp of resolute courage.

Rukmin saw before him a man whom he would have received with satisfaction as his son-in-law had fate so decreed, a man to whose care he would have willingly entrusted Asta. But how could he—Rukmin—undo what had already been done?

Sorely tempted to encourage Nara's advances, yet conscious of the preposterousness of such a course, he withdrew his gaze from Nara's face; and, in accordance with Oriental politeness which permitted the host to dismiss his guest, Rukmin made a sign that the interview was at an end.

'The honoured guest has my leave to depart,' he said, in his well-bred manner.

Nara's features grew sharp with the pain of sudden disappointment. He had been allowed so short a time in which to plead his cause. On his way to the house he had thought out so many elaborate sentences, and as yet it seemed that he had declared nothing. No opportunity had been given him to utter his studied words.

'It is very soon for me to go,' he murmured, with dismay in his voice. 'Must I depart?'

'As soon as your good breeding dictates,' Rukmin replied, with an air of polish which made Nara wince.

'Sir, I have said so little,' Nara expostulated. 'Allow me to express myself more fully.'

Rukmin made a profound bow.

'You have said enough. I thank you for your courteous visit, and I will detain you no longer.'

Nara drew a sharp breath through his teeth.

'My lord! I implore you, let me speak! Let me convince you to my way of thinking!'

Rukmin remained silent, his features preserving an inscrutable expression.

Becoming more impassionate, Nara took a step forward, his hands outstretched in earnest pleading.

‘Sir! how can I prove my sincerity?’ he exclaimed. ‘Do not compel me to depart in hopelessness. There is nothing I would not do to serve you if by so serving my wish could be gratified.’

Rukmin maintained his air of impassivity.

‘Esteemed guest,’ he said, making another cold bow, ‘I have business that demands my presence elsewhere.’

Nara let his hands drop to his sides. He uttered no further word of protest, but his dark, proud eyes and his heaving breast were eloquent of all he would have said.

Realizing how useless it would be to overstay his welcome, he exerted sufficient self-control to suppress his feelings, and to politely take leave of his host.

In a manner less heavy than that which he had previously adopted towards Nara, Rukmin uttered the sentence.

‘*Charhti daulat barhti hayat!*’ (May you long prosper and thrive!)

With a subtle sense of gratification Nara acknowledged the expression of good-will.

• ‘*Rām! Rām!*’ he murmured, bending low in salutation.

He then left the house and, mounting his horse, rode away.

Not daring to show herself, Asta, with her

face pressed closely to the open brickwork of the roof parapet, caught a glimpse of him as he passed below, and saw the swift glance he flung in her direction. She thrust a red flower quickly through one of the square openings, and then as rapidly drew it back, fearful lest anyone but Nara should have seen the signal.

How prison-like seemed the barrier that concealed her from him! As he went out of sight, she beat her hands upon the brickwork in a passionate desire to dash the parapet down, rebelling against the confinement which, until now, had never been so hard for her to bear.

‘How long shall I be kept from him?’ she cried in her heart. ‘Oh, this hideous wall! When will it no longer separate us?’

In her dread of betraying him as well as herself, she had not dared to stand up for him to see her, had not dared to lower again to him the silken thread. But for the quick thrust of the red flower through the opening he might not have known she was there, might not have known how faithfully she watched each day for his coming and going.

While she was in this rebellious state of mind she was summoned down to Rukmin’s presence.

She smoothed her veil hastily, and, strugg-

ling to calm her feelings, went and stood in a meek attitude before her father.

‘Child,’ he said kindly, ‘I have been thinking about your happiness.’

‘How can that be?’ she replied, ‘when I have no happiness!’

‘What wish have you ungratified that it is in my power to grant?’ he asked.

She laid the palms of her hands together, and stood silently before him.

‘Truly, it seems that you have no wish ungratified that I can gratify,’ he said.

Asta remained silent, with her hands folded and her head bent.

‘Speak!’ he exclaimed, ‘and declare what I say to be a fact.’

Instead she sank upon her knees and extended her joined hands towards his feet.

‘You still keep your lips closed?’ he said. ‘For what reason are you silent?’

‘Lest by speech I anger my father,’ she replied, her voice very low.

‘How so? Come, child, answer me as I expect to be answered.’

‘I dare not,’ she replied, bending her head almost to the ground.

‘I command you to acquaint me with your desire,’ he said, with sudden sternness.

‘I obey,’ she murmured. Then, as he waited

for her to proceed, she summoned up all her courage, and said : ' I have one wish unsatisfied, O father ! that you can satisfy.'

' Let me hear it,' he replied.

' Give me first your forgiveness.'

' Whatever the wish be, I forgive you for it.'

' It is this,' she said, keeping her hands joined, and bending down so that her veil hid her face, ' I pray that my father will consent to my marriage with Nara, the son of Zarrin the zemindar.'

' Child, you ask a favour it is impossible for me to grant.'

' No act of goodness is impossible to my father,' Asta replied.

' Child ! child ! do not overrate my powers.'

' Dear father, you have never yet refused me a request,' she pleaded ; ' bestow upon me now my heart's desire, and give me in marriage to the great zemindar's son.'

' How know you that the zemindar is great ?' Rukmin asked.

' I gathered the truth from the talk of the Lady Brinda, long ago, before I had heard the name of Nara.'

' I do not approve of such gossip,' Rukmin muttered. ' Women talk too much among themselves of matters that should not concern them.'

‘I will try always to be discreet in my speech, and so not cause mischief,’ Asta said; ‘but, O father! will you in your goodness grant me the favour I have begged? I have always been an obedient daughter, and have acted with affection towards you, nor hitherto have I asked any favour that it was not your pleasure to grant. Father, say that you will give me my wish. It means more than life to me.’

Moved to compassion, he stooped and raised her to her feet.

‘Try to await, with resignation, the development of your destiny,’ he said.

‘Am I refused?’ she asked, in a choking voice.

‘I have refused you nothing,’ he answered.

She raised her face and looked at him with intense eagerness.

‘Have you consented?’ she whispered, her voice stifled by the rapid beat of her heart. ‘Oh, father dear! have you given me my desire? Have you made me so unutterably happy?’

He laid his hand tenderly upon her head.

‘Trust in your fate,’ he said; ‘what is to be, will be, since, when you were six days old, your destiny was written unseen upon your forehead.’

‘But, father——’

He silenced her with a gesture of command.

‘Speak no more on the subject,’ he said.

'Woe is me!' she exclaimed, dropping her hands in despair; 'how have I sinned, that I should endure such bitter trial?'

'Hush, child! Bear your days with patience. I can counsel you no other way.'

Tears sprang to Asta's eyes, and her lips quivered pathetically.

She had made her request, and to what end? Her pleading had gained her nothing. Through her tears she gazed from her father's face to a sky-blue image of Krishna, the guardian household idol, standing upon white and crimson lotus flower; and from that her gaze wandered to the smouldering sacred fire which, from year's end to year's end, was never allowed to become extinguished. Then she looked again at her father, and with a sob stretched out her hands to him.

Understanding her mute appeal, he took her hands caressingly in his own.

'Take courage,' he said; 'these tears are unseemly and are without cause. I have neither encouraged you with "yes" nor repulsed you with "no."'

Her breast gave a bound of hope, and she clung to his hand in gratitude.

'Go, child, to your chamber,' he said gently, 'and reflect how, in future, not to lose hope so easily.'

Obediently she went from his presence, her heart rising in a tumult of hope and fear.

Rukmin threw himself upon a cushioned seat and gave himself up to deep thought. When at length he roused himself and went out into the open air, his face was lined with anxiety, and he omitted to give one or two orders which, had his mind been less preoccupied, he would have considered urgent.

During the remainder of the day he continued in a meditative mood, and on the following morning his manner had become more morose. He experienced an unusual depression of spirits, which gloom was intensified by his self-sought solitude. He seemed to have lost interest in the common concerns of life, and he gave no heed to his servants, who watched him covertly, wondering what could be preying on the mind of their master.

In the afternoon, while he was reclining in a reflective attitude in the veranda, with his forehead resting on his hand, he was ceremoniously informed of Nara's approach.

'Take him my compliments and say I will receive him,' Rukmin ordered, as the servant stood back after making the announcement.

At a respectful distance Nara remained, astride his horse, uncertain as to whether he would be admitted into Rukmin's presence,

and not daring to raise even his eyelashes in the direction of the parapet, behind which he imagined Asta must be keeping watch.

Nara felt elated when a man-servant came from the house and uttered the formula :

'Khudawand-ko salam dia !'

Dismounting, Nara threw the reins to a boy who had come forward for the purpose, and the next moment the young zemindar was exchanging a stately greeting with Rukmin.

'I trust you will excuse me if I appear remiss with regard to my duties as a host,' Rukmin said ; 'I am too harassed in mind to heed anything except that which weighs upon my thoughts.'

'Pardon me for coming at such a moment to pay my respects to your esteemed self,' Nara replied, 'but—I was naturally impatient for an interview.'

'More impatient than prudent,' Rukmin remarked.

'My lord, no man ever had a fairer excuse for impatience,' Nara said, with courtliness.

'That may be. But I have no desire to discuss your personal interests. I am already overwhelmed with anxiety on my own account.'

'I would gladly perform some service for you,' Nara said. 'Is there any way by which I can relieve your mind of its burden ?'

‘There is a way.’

‘Honour me by naming it.’

‘Enable me to forget the circumstance which perplexes my brain.’

‘Advise me how to do so,’ Nara said, ‘and I will exert my faculties on your behalf.’

‘Refrain from mentioning to me the cause of your visit,’ Rukmin replied.

Nara was plunged in dismay. It seemed to him it would be better if he had not been received, than for him to be compelled to keep silent about the matter which had prompted his visit.

His eyes blazed with resentment against what he considered an outrageous injustice; but no other sign of his feelings escaped him.

Rukmin watched him narrowly.

‘In the abstract, you profess much,’ he observed, ‘but I perceive you are unwilling to perform a marked service that requires, in a slight degree, the setting aside of self.’

Nara drew himself up proudly.

‘There are occasions when it would be unworthy for a man to ignore his own claims,’ he said. ‘I do not come as a saint.’

‘One could hardly fail to discover that fact,’ Rukmin remarked, with sarcasm.

‘Then, my lord, commend me for my truthfulness,’ Nara retorted, in his turn becoming

satirical, 'and at least acknowledge that I am an honest man.'

'At least?' Rukmin echoed, raising his eyebrows. 'Has anything nobler been created out of earth?'

Nara was silent.

'Come, young lord,' Rukmin continued, in a tone of approval; 'I recognize your claim to my esteem, and I am pleased that you have paid me this visit. What news is there from the surrounding districts of the Doon? Since my return, I have not given attention to anything outside my own affairs.'

'The tiger that has been so long a terror in the neighbourhood has been captured,' Nara said.

'The man-eater?' Rukmin inquired, at once interested.

'The same.'

'That is excellent news. The dreaded beast carried off a great number of aged persons and helpless children.'

'Thirty within the last four months, and too many by far, considering that most infants and old people have so-called natural protectors.'

'Ha! You think the man-eater was an incentive to crime?'

'It seemed so by the number of victims that were carried off and devoured,' Nara remarked.

‘What was easier than to leave a feeble baby asleep in a nook where the ravenous beast might prowl? What was easier than to drug an old man, or a burdensome woman, and place the unconscious victim near an open door, to which, by chance, the man-eater would prowl in search of prey? The tiger was thirsting for human blood; nobody was blamed if in the morning an aged person or a girl-child was missing. And this has been going on for months.’

‘I am glad the man-eater is no longer at large,’ Rukmin said. ‘Was the deadly beast trapped by an English sportsman?’

‘Several such lay in wait for weeks to shoot the formidable brute, but without success. He had got all the man-eater’s cunning, and moved with great stealth.’

‘I must discover who trapped the tiger,’ Rukmin said, ‘for I should like to reward so brave a man for the service he has rendered. Where is he to be found?’

‘The tiger’s captor is before you,’ Nara answered. ‘By watching from a tree night after night, I discovered the brute’s lair, and with as little delay as possible set a trap, into which I had the satisfaction of watching him walk—a magnificent specimen of his kind, with thick supple muscles and a sinuous back

covered with dark-striped, rufous splendour. I have offered him alive to the Rajah of Arunpore, who has several caged tigers in his palace grounds, and who has promised to make all arrangements for the beast's transfer—no easy matter considering this man-eater is of unusual ferocity and size, measuring about ten feet from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail. He had gained his dexterity through age, judging by the long, spreading hair on his cheeks and the grim set of his great jaws.'

'It was a creditable deed on your part to have made the ravenous beast captive.'

'A few human lives the more will be left to run their natural course,' Nara said. 'When I first took up my position on the tree, I thought I should have nothing to do throughout the night but count the stars. But I witnessed many unholy scenes. On one occasion the door of a hut was flung open, and in the ray of lamplight that came from within, I saw a woman and her husband—both equally evil in looks—drag out a bed upon which lay a paralyzed old man. They left him outside in the darkness, and went within and made themselves safe. I could hear the anguished moans of the paralytic, who, apparently, knew for what purpose he had been left there; and I sprang down from my place of concealment, and, going

to the hut, beat upon the door with my hands, shouting, "Take back the old man, for his blood will be upon your heads if the man-eater finds him thus and rends him!" And, frightened, the woman and her husband returned, and carried in the paralytic, and closed the door. Another night I saw a fierce-faced hag open her door and thrust out a naked baby that she left, wailing, in the dark. "Wretched woman!" I called out, "lift the child into safety, lest the little one should make a meal for the prowling tiger!" At sound of my voice the woman also grew afraid, and snatched the child back into the hut. And to many others who were thrusting out infants and aged persons for food for the tiger I shouted: "Beware of the Brahmastra—the mysterious, invisible weapon which deals infallible destruction to the sinners it strikes." And the victims were taken back into the security of the houses.'

'I congratulate you on having captured the tiger,' Rukmin said. 'I hope you will allow me to present you with a token of my appreciation. I shall consider it a favour if you will let me know what form my gift may take, as I wish to bestow what will give certain pleasure to the receiver.'

Nara's eyes flashed with soft fire, and his lips parted with the desire to cry out that

Asta should be his reward. He controlled the impulse, and set his lips firmly together, checked in the utterance of his speech by the remembrance of the service his host had demanded of him.

After reflecting for a moment, Nara said :

‘There is a trinket I greatly covet, and which would be a rich reward for capturing a tiger.’

‘Name the prize. Already it is yours.’

‘I crave your indulgence if I make a demand beyond your expectation,’ Nara said, breathing hard in suspense. ‘I want one of the bells from the silver girdle possessed by an inmate of your house who, with the ruby of youth on her lips, inseparably wears on her brow the pearl-wreath of truth.’

Maintaining silence, Rukmin gazed upon the ground. He knew he had unwittingly promised away one of the jewelled bells from the zone which, as a charm, always encircled Asta’s waist. Yet his wishes had been so far respected that no direct mention of her had been made.

‘I should have borne in mind that the man who could noose a tiger must possess tact,’ he remarked at length, lifting his glance to Nara’s face, ‘and that, waiting his chance, he would be on the alert to gain what he had set his heart on obtaining.’

Nara forebore to make reply. He was afraid to trust himself to speak, lest he should utter a rash word which would lose him Rukmin's good opinion.

Far from feeling annoyed, Rukmin experienced a sense of satisfaction at the turn events had taken. He entertained a genuine liking for the young zemindar whose ready wit he admired, and whose perseverance with regard to Asta he could not but secretly applaud.

'What is won should not be kept from the winner,' Rukmin observed enigmatically. 'Your reward rests in your own hands.'

Absenting himself from the veranda for a few minutes, he returned and presented to Nara a tiny silver bell, the tongue of which was tipped with a sparkling star-stone.

'There are remaining on the girdle twenty-four bells, each one in itself an amulet,' Rukmin said. 'If on twenty-four different occasions you can entertain me with some story relating your own experience, the rest of the amulets will be yours. Make your visits at the end of the days, and each night upon which you succeed in distracting me from my anxiety, I will reward you with a bell.'

Nara put his hands together and received the amulet reverently in his palms. At the

touch of the silver charm his pulses throbbed with triumph, and as he saw a blue light flash from the gem he looked upon it as an omen of good. After expressing, in appropriate language, his extreme gratification, he felt so elated by the possession of his prize that a sudden boldness swept aside all his previous caution.

‘My lord,’ he said, ‘when I hold in my hands twenty-five studded bells there will still remain within the zone the most precious gem on earth. I beg you will allow me the privilege of relating at the last a story by which, with your favour, I may win that fair jewel of jewels.’

‘Make the trial,’ Rukmin replied half satirically. ‘You have my consent. But bear in mind the fact that the story must, in my opinion, excel in point of interest all those to which I shall have previously listened.’

‘My lord, you have my eternal gratitude and esteem,’ Nara exclaimed in a tone of exultation, while his dark eyes glowed with victory. ‘Your tolerance will bring you contentment, and may the lady of the silver zone prosper well!’

CHAPTER X

FULFILLED

VISITING Rukmin the next evening, Nara related with so much force and eloquence the manner in which he had saved a boy who was bathing in a river from being destroyed by a crocodile, in the long jaws of which the bather had been caught, that Rukmin, who had been entertained by the narrative, gave Nara, with many compliments, the second bell, set with a garnet. On a succeeding evening he won a bell containing an opal; then he gained another studded with an emerald; then another adorned with a sapphire; and so on, until he had in his possession eleven bells.

By this time he felt as if he had exhausted his supply of anecdotes, and when he went for the twelfth bell he could recount nothing of distinct interest. He made numerous attempts; but his words lacked point, and although he related incident after incident with artificial eloquence, he was rewarded with only an expression of patient boredom from his criticizer.

During several nights the same thing occurred, and, in despair, Nara repeated one of his former narratives, which on a previous occasion had afforded Rukmin considerable amusement. Nara continued to the end, declaiming in a flashy style, and secretly congratulating himself on having found a way out of his difficulty.

At the finish, to his consternation, Rukmin said, with unmistakable meaning :

‘ Worthy lord, bread twice served is stale.’

But on his way home Nara recalled what he considered an extraordinary incident connected with a leopard-fight which he had witnessed in a jungle, and he hurried back to relate the story to Rukmin, who, however, expressed himself tired out, and suggested that the remarkable event should be told on some future occasion.

On the ensuing evening Nara recounted the anecdote. While telling it, he was unpleasantly conscious that the incident was not so exciting as he had thought it on the previous evening. It sounded quite an ordinary affair, hardly worth mentioning—especially as the leopards, before they had finished their struggle, were both shot by a *shikari* who had been watching his opportunity from a tree.

Rukmin, coldly critical, thought the story tame, and did not disguise his opinion.

‘That was by no means an uncommon end for jungle-beasts to come to,’ he remarked, in a depreciatory tone.

Nara felt vexed with himself for not having invented a different ending, in which the sportsman might, through the unexpected breaking of a branch, have fallen from the tree, and the leopards, both pouncing upon him at once, could have torn him to pieces. Nara went over in his mind the way in which he could have enlarged upon the savagery of the brutes.

His ardour was damped by Rukmin's next words :

‘The strife of kind against kind is ancient history; almost as ancient as the world—of which a narrative would have been more interesting.’

Nara sighed heavily over his failure.

‘Old as the world is, no man has told its story,’ he remarked sententiously.

‘Nor ever will,’ Rukmin said. ‘A story must have an end, and when the world terminates, no man who has dwelt in it will be left alive to relate its final chaos.’

‘There will be one more mystery added to the universe,’ Nara replied, ‘and already its secrets are legion. What is this earth, and what are the innumerable planets—the count-

less self-shining fixed stars but so many mysteries upheld by a greater mystery, too profound for human intelligence ?

‘Truly,’ Rukmin assented, ‘we see around us mystery changing within mystery ; and we know not the Almighty’s will until His will is done. To-night the earth is serene, and all the celestial bodies are calm in the sky. To-morrow this earth and all the masses of the unknown worlds may have become a disordered mixture of elements ; a scene of encompassing confusion and awfulness—of sweeping darkness—of rushing light—of scorching vapour—of icy blast ; of thunderous sound and terrific silence ! We know not.’

‘Everything is moved by the Omnipotent,’ Nara said. ‘So it has been from time immemorial—so it will be everlastingly.’

Rukmin acquiesced with solemnity ; and after a pause, Nara, in a somewhat diffident manner, referred to his leopard anecdote. He apprehended that the errand on which he had come would be put out of Rukmin’s mind by other thoughts.

‘To return to my story,’ Nara said. ‘There were a few undoubtedly interesting points about it.’

‘What a pity you omitted them!’ was Rukmin’s satirical response.

Nara made a last stand, although he felt it to be a hopeless one.

'I considered the story a striking one,' he said.

And so it had seemed to him until he had commenced to relate it.

'You were right,' Rukmin replied with irony. 'It struck me with the idea that it was unworthy of the teller.'

And to Nara's chagrin no amulet was forthcoming.

In solitude Asta shared the sharpness of his disappointment. She knew for what purpose her bells were being taken, and wept bitterly every time Nara failed to win a fresh one. She reflected dismally that if he made such slow and uncertain progress a protracted period would elapse before he could claim the complete number—if, indeed, he ever claimed them all.

On the morning following his latest and most dispiriting failure, Asta stole up on the housetop to brood by herself over her disappointment.

• Kameena was still too languid to follow her, and for this circumstance Asta was not sorry, as she was left more to her own thoughts than she would otherwise have been.

Standing on an embroidered cushion, she

looked beyond the roofs of the clustering houses to the surrounding landscape, and observed how perceptibly the flowerage and foliage had changed since the morning of the accident which had been the means of making Nara known to her.

The heavy red flowers of the great silk-cotton trees and the flaming poinsettia leaves had fallen and faded, the bamboo plumes had their greenness tinged with gold, the limes and oranges were ripening on their down-bent branches, and the plum, cherry, pear, and peach trees wove a pink and white web of bloom throughout the valley. Among the boughs of fruit-blossom flew small, sapphire-hued birds, and flights of green parakeets winged their passage noisily into the valley.

Over the azure of the sky floated low-gathered white clouds that threw upon the blue-wrapped Himalayan slopes patches of shadow resembling in appearance purple grape-bloom. In the forests the orchids were flowering on the trees; in the verdant fields the unripe corn spikes stood high, and along the boundaries the endless rose-hedges and wild jasmine shrubs gaily expanded their perfumed petals.

It was the Indian springtide, and Asta was dressed in a clinging amber robe, yellow being

the colour which among Brahminists symbolized the advent of spring.

There fell on the air a soft, trilling flow of melodious sounds from a piccolo that was being played upon by Lilar, the goatherd, who was reclining on a low wall, from which he could watch the goats in their grazing-ground. The goats and the piccolo were all Lilar had to entertain him in life; but the little goatherd knew not discontent, and his heart was as light as sunshine as he lay on the rough stone wall with its trails of canary-coloured primula that grew abundantly in the shade of the trees.

Lilar, who had looked on sorrowfully at Aramida's death, entertained no recollection of her to-day as he revelled in his quaint music, modulating his notes with bird-like variations, and pausing now and then to listen to an answering warble from a piccolo some distance off.

Asta paid no attention to the harmonious sounds. She could think of nothing but whether Nara would let his chance slip by. Restless and harassed, she stepped from the cushion and paced rapidly to and fro with her head bent and her brow puckered in anxious thought.

It was not an hour in which she could

expect to catch sight of Nara, consequently the roadway had no interest for her. She did not even glance down when she heard a couple of horses stop in front of the house. Had she peeped in that direction she would have seen two horsemen, one pulling up a few paces in front of the other. They were both arrayed gorgeously, as though for a fête, and the younger man, who had ridden behind his senior, wore over his white vesture a long, draped orange scarf, and on his head a turban of a pure bright golden hue.

Without heeding the horsemen, Asta could not help hearing their voices, although their words were indistinguishable on account of other sounds in the road, and the trills and turns of Lilar's piccolo.

Ten minutes later Vanita, in a flutter of excitement, hurried to Asta's side, and, drawing back the girl's veil, looked tenderly into her sorrowful face.

'My dream is fulfilled!' Vanita exclaimed in a low, excited voice. 'Almos has arrived!'

Asta staggered back, and pressed her hand over her heart. •

'It cannot be true!' she said with dry lips. 'It is a dreadful mistake!'

'Almos and his father are even now in the house,' Vanita affirmed. 'After being liberated

by the Tibetan tribesmen who kept them in bondage for so long a time, Hiran and his son returned to our own country. Their caste has been restored, and they have entered into a successful trade with those who were their enemies. You have no more cause for anxiety. Almos is here!

Asta dropped upon her knees and buried her face in her hands.

'He has come too late!' she said. 'He shall never claim me for his wife. Never—never—never!'

'Hush, pearl!' Vanita whispered in alarm; 'it is your fate that you shall be his wife.'

'Such a hard fate can never be mine,' Asta retorted passionately. 'I would rather fling myself from this parapet and drop dead in the road than be united to him!'

'Yet you have prayed for his arrival!'

'That was long ago. Lately I have prayed that he might never come!'

'Yet he is here!'

'The greater my misfortune.'

'Say rather the more forceful your destiny,' Vanita said.

'No!—no!—no!' Asta cried, smothering her own voice in her veil to keep herself from shrieking aloud. 'I tell you I will never be the wife of Almos—never!—never!'

She got up from her knees and ran wildly down the steps to her own chamber, where, with none to watch her, she rent her garments and beat her breast in despair, keeping her face covered and her hair disarrayed until she knew Hiran and Almos had departed.

That night, Nara, having been informed of the arrival in Dehra Doon of Hiran and Almos, went as usual to Rukmin, and begged permission to relate a wonderful and mysterious tale, which in the watch of the previous night had come to Nara's imagination.

Anticipating a repetition of Nara's recent failures, Rukmin consented, and Nara, with his eyes flashing and his voice vibrating with feeling, narrated a romance with so much brilliancy of language that Rukmin listened entranced. At the close of the story he kept his word, and bestowed upon Nara another bell.

But there were still thirteen left on Asta's girdle, and all the night she lay awake fretting over the thought that on the morrow Nara's narrative powers might again fail him.

In the morning she rose unrefreshed from her couch, and until noon she spent the hours in fasting and grieving, so that when Hiran's wife, Majith, came to see her, Asta looked so woebegone, and her features appeared so

shrunken that Majith was by no means impressed by the girl's beauty; in fact, Asta kept her eyes moodily downcast, and, pleading a pain in her forehead, covered her face from view as often as possible.

Brinda, to whom word had been sent, arrived in a painted palanquin to meet Majith; and Rukmin's sons' wives—Umi, Elwa, and Dori—also came to enter into the domestic discussion. They had so much to talk about that Asta found herself personally ignored, although she was the principal subject of their discourse.

Asta was thankful when it was time for the visitors to depart; she felt a desperate inclination to rush away to her own chamber to indulge in her grief, for she had heard them discussing gleefully future events in which Almos and herself were named as the chief actors.

'Her joy is so great that it has overcome her,' Dori remarked, when Asta answered reluctantly the few polite questions put to her.

Observing a teardrop course down Asta's cheek, Elwa said:

'See! she weeps for very gladness.'

And when Asta turned away to conceal her bitterness, Umi laughed gaily, and exclaimed:

'She is shy, and needs must hide her face.'

She has scarcely lifted her eyes to us since we came.'

'It is well,' Majith said, with satisfaction ; 'she is saving all her smiles for her husband. There will soon be an imposing entertainment at this house.'

'Certainly ; the marriage of Rukmin's daughter will be a grand affair,' Brinda exclaimed in a congratulatory tone.

'She has much to be proud of,' murmured Kameena from her couch of silk cushions. 'Who would not be glad to be in her place ?'

Attributing Asta's reticence to girlish modesty, they all bantered her amiably, yet in a way which made her shiver as though she had been touched with ice.

Vanita glanced at her askance ; for Vanita knew that Asta's tears had not sprung from joy, and that her heart was weighed down with sorrow.

In the evening Nara kept his appointment with Rukmin, and related wittily an anecdote about a heavy bet he had won over a contest between two scorpions which had been set to fight for the amusement of an assembly of men. Nara would not have been rewarded with a bell on this occasion had it not been for the fact that the man who had lost the wager was greatly disliked by Rukmin. The details of the

incident gratified his feeling of antipathy towards the baffled wagerer, who had been plunged into a fit of rage by his loss. Having laughed over the story and asked for portions of it to be dilated upon, Rukmin could not reasonably withhold the reward, so Nara departed in high spirits.

The next night Nara related another successful tale, and after that, for nine consecutive nights, he declaimed like an inspired narrator, holding Rukmin enthralled.

Then followed failure after failure, censure after censure ; and Asta, with two bells left on her girdle, counted them day and night, with her brain in a whirl of dismay.

Once more had come the marriage season, and in every direction sounded trumpets and timbrels ; from every quarter issued the throb of the tom-toms, and the hollow roar of the sankh.

Elaborate preparations were being made for Asta's nuptials, and in six days' time there would be placed upon her wrist by Majith the circlet of iron which would proclaim Rukmin's daughter the wife of Hiran's son.

Only six days, and a couple of bells were still linked to the silver zone !

Nara was in a fever of anxiety when he contemplated what might be the outcome of those

six days ; and having lost confidence in himself, both as an anecdotist and a romancer, he went to Rukmin soon after sunrise and entreated to be put instead to some other test. Each hour of Nara's despair made it more difficult for him to think of anything but the crisis in his own life, and he felt any task would be easier than the one allotted to him. He pleaded for a test of muscular strength ; but Rukmin remained inexorable, and merely raised his eyebrows in surprise that such an appeal should be made to him.

‘ Let me have my way,’ Nara pleaded, ‘ and I will entertain you during every evening of my life—afterwards.’

‘ I can only keep to my word,’ Rukmin replied, too firm in his sense of justice to yield to Nara's entreaty.

‘ Will you allow these merchant-nuptials to take place ?’ Nara asked, with fierce arrogance.

‘ I shall do my duty, and leave the rest to Divine Superintendence,’ was Rukmin's answer.

In the evening Nara again presented himself to Rukmin, who was so astounded by an enchanting tale related to him that he gave the narrator his usual reward without a murmur.

And on the evening that followed, Nara, surprised at his success, and in a fever of

desperation, related of ancient days a story for which he received, triumphantly, the last bell.

His fate now hung on the final story he was to narrate, and during the night he was unable to sleep, so great was his anxiety. He passed the next day in solitude, racking his brains for some suitable subject upon which to dilate. He could think of nothing likely to interest his hearer, and when the evening came Nara's spirit was sunk in utter want of hope. All his previous narratives would avail him nothing if on this occasion his wit failed him.

His head ached, and his eyes were dull from the watch of the previous night. Without a distinct idea in his brain, except the knowledge of his inability to perform his task, he set out miserably to keep his appointment.

As he drew near the house which walled Asta as in a prison from him, he gnashed his teeth in bitterness. Preparations for the wedding festivities had been in progress for several days. In front of the house a tinsel-covered platform, over which was hung a crimson canopy, had been erected under a dhak-tree, the flame-of-the-forest, ablaze with clusters of velvety, fire-coloured bloom, that in lieu of leaves covered its spreading branches; and the professional musicians, singers, and dancers had arrived in

readiness to perform at intervals during the marriage ceremonial.

The air was full of the sound of drums that were being beaten at other weddings. The dull, monotonous throb struck upon Nara's nerves, and set his heart pulsating heavily. He clenched his hands in savage resentment against his rival. Why, Nara asked himself fiercely, should Almos have given to him so bright a treasure, and he—Nara—have nothing?

As he approached the house, in the soft evening starlight, he was surprised to see Rukmin reclining on a couch in the veranda with his eyes closed. Apparently tired out by the arrangements he had made for the approaching entertainment at his house, he had dropped into a doze. Two ragged watchmen were squatting idly at their posts outside the veranda, and a small portable grate containing red-hot charcoal placed near threw a glow on Rukmin's face.

The watchmen stood up and salaamed as Nara approached. Without heeding them, he stood gazing at Rukmin. And as Nara gazed a look of keenest apprehension widened his eyes, for he perceived that the sleeper was in instant danger of a swift death.

Upon Rukmin's couch had crept a small, deadly serpent, a karait, which had coiled itself

round his turban, with its flat head against the fold nearest his forehead. The eyes of the snake glittered in the light from the fire, and slowly the reptile raised its head and darted out its forked tongue.

One movement on the part of the sleeper—the mere opening of his eyes, and the venomous fangs of the karait might pierce his flesh and leave a fatal poison in his blood; one turn of Rukmin's head, and, unconscious of his peril, he might receive a deadly bite which in a few moments would render him lifeless.

An expression of alertness was in Nara's eyes, the masterful, unflinching look that might be in the eyes of a fencer about to make his final, conquering thrust.

With a quick, studied, silent movement, he seized close up near its head the hissing karait, and instantly its cold clammy length coiled round his wrist. Grasped in such a manner as to be unable to bite its captor, the angry snake gave forth hiss after hiss.

The sound roused Rukmin from his slumber, and half raising himself, he looked in amazement at Nara, who was standing near the grate of burning charcoal with the hissing karait in his grasp, his wrist encircled by its dark coils.

Going to the edge of the veranda, Nara flung out his arm and relaxed his grip on the

reptile. Released suddenly from the pressure, the serpent dropped to the ground and glided rapidly away into a thicket.

Nara then turned calmly to Rukmin, and, after exchanging the customary salutations, as though nothing unusual had occurred, said :

‘The king-death visited you, and has departed, carrying with him all his venom.’

‘You should be thankful that he left none in your hand,’ Rukmin replied, knowing nothing of the danger he himself had been in. ‘I suspended my breath, fearing the monarch-death, angered, would strike you with his fatal fangs.’

‘My lord,’ Nara said, ‘I, knowing that I held in my hand the king-death, was able to elude the danger ; but you, who reposed in ignorance that the king’s head lay on your brow, slept in peril of your life.’

‘Explain your meaning,’ Rukmin muttered, his interest instantly roused.

With dramatic force Nara recounted the incident. Rukmin listened eagerly to every word, and at the close of the narrative begged to have it repeated.

•Accompanying his speech with appropriate gestures, Nara described the circumstances again, enacting with fidelity to detail the manner in which he had snatched the snake,

and finishing up by stepping to the edge of the veranda and flinging out his arm with an action similar to that with which he had set the reptile free.

At the conclusion of the narrative Rukmin started up excitedly.

'By the stars above!' he exclaimed, 'this story concerning myself is the most fascinating I have ever listened to!'

Suddenly to Nara, as he heard the words, his own heart seemed to beat loud, like a marriage drum. Had he, unawares, fulfilled what he had felt to be a hopeless task? Was his description of the karait incident accepted as his final and most momentous narrative?

He resolved not to let so unexpected and brilliant an opportunity slip by.

'My lord,' he said, bowing low, 'by your own reckoning my task is fulfilled. One fair gem still graces the silver zone—and that gem, bright and beautiful with living lustre—I claim!'

'As fate decrees,' was all Rukmin replied.
• And the whole of that night Nara's hopes and fears hung on those three tantalizing and enigmatic words, harassing his mind with ceaseless and almost maddening uncertainty.

CHAPTER XI

KHUSH RAHO

PREPARATIONS for the marriage of Rukmin's daughter were carried on apace.

Hiran, on his part, was sparing no expense, since, instead of having been financially ruined by his confinement in Tibet, he had become more successful as a trader than in his earlier days he had ever hoped to be. He had withstood the severity of the long Arctic winters on the exposed plateau, and although the tribe of Tibetans into whose power he had fallen had kept him for more than three years in their territory, the men had, in spite of their early threats, treated him benignantlly, and having at length gained full confidence in him, had released him with his son and followers unharmed.

The enterprising tribesmen were now carrying on a flourishing trade with him, receiving rice, indigo, tea, opium, and tobacco, in exchange for yaks' tails, wool, and gold. And, in addition to his newly acquired wealth, Hiran

was in possession of his previously accumulated money, which, during his long absence, had remained safely in the bank in which he had deposited it, before taking his caravan beyond Nilang.

In his absence his wife Majith had returned to her own family with her younger children, and had been treated with kindness by her relatives, who had never entirely given up hope of her husband's return.

The knowledge of Hiran's wealth did not reconcile Asta to a marriage with his son, and during these days of general congratulation she abandoned herself to bitter revolt, lying for the greater part of the time on the ground in her own chamber, with her forehead pressed to the floor and her hair and raiment in disorder. Her eyes were dimmed by bitter tears.

Why should she make herself look fair, if only for Almos? Why should she continue to be gentle and gracious if Almos was to receive her? Better that her garments should be rent, and that ashes should be poured upon her head!

When the day arrived on which the marriage ceremonies were to be commenced, she looked desperately wild and haggard, and was in a feverish condition which bordered on to frenzy when she saw the preparations that were being made for her bridal.

Informed of her unwillingness, Rukmin, who had had the scheme in his mind since the karait incident, gave a secret order to Vānita to put the bride's attire on Kameena, and let Asta lie on the couch in place of the invalid girl.

So Kameena, amazed and scarcely daring to trust her senses, was decked in the sumptuous robe, and was conveyed on a seat of state before the assembly.

Flower-wreathed, jewelled, and opaquely veiled, confused by the proceedings, and allowed no choice in the matter, she was prompted to go mechanically through the ceremonies, which, with intervals for entertainment, lasted several days.

Majith, who had seen little of the two girls, failed to detect the imposition. And Almos, when the bride's veil was parted, and he was told to look for the first time upon her face, perceived only that she gazed on him with timid appeal, and he was satisfied. Indeed, Kameena, roused from her habitual depression, and with her face framed in flowers and jewels, had developed a prettiness new to her features, and it is doubtful whether Asta, had she been forced to go through the part in her present mood, would have won as much admiration.

At the conclusion of the ceremonial, when

the moment had arrived for the departure of the newly-married couple, there was a falter in Vanita's voice, but none in Rukmin's, as, together, they addressed Almos with the formula, while clasping his hands and the bride's:

'Until this time our daughter has remained under our protection, but now through Divine dispensation she is consigned for ever to your charge. May you leniently overlook her shortcomings and frailties, and prove your fidelity by being always constant.'

Brinda and many others who knew Asta and Kameena intimately had, at the outset, been aware of the deception, but, with Oriental secretiveness, those who had made the discovery gave no sign of having perceived the substitution of Kameena for Asta.

Rukmin, everybody knew, must have a good reason for the course of action he had followed; and Kameena for a short period having been his adopted daughter, as well as being his brother's child, there had scarcely been three words that did not apply truthfully to her when the bride's lineal descent for three generations was proclaimed.

The officiating priest, in spite of the unusually heavy fee he received, suspected nothing, and every time an opportunity pre-

sented itself, Hiran and Majith declared their appreciation of the bride, while Almos manifested thorough satisfaction. So, those most closely concerned being content, the rest regarded the proceedings with approval.

Kameena, who before she had known she was to be the bride had been filled with secret envy, could scarcely realize her good fortune now that she was the wife of Almos. His tender manner towards her had at once won her trust, and the first intent look exchanged between them had cast over her a pleasurable glamour.

A few among the assemblage wondered what was to become of Asta, but none gave voice to the question.

When the bride and bridegroom had departed for their temporary home, a few miles distant, and all the guests had dispersed, Vanita felt qualms of anxiety on Asta's account.

'This wedding has promoted Kameena's welfare,' Vanita said, regarding Asta pensively, 'but you, pearl, are still unwedded.'

'I shall not long remain so,' Asta replied. 'If I am not mistaken, there will be immediate preparations for another wedding at this house.'

'I should like to feel sure on that point,' Vanita said. 'It would be a dreadful calamity if no husband for you should be forthcoming.'

'It would indeed,' Asta agreed, with a soft smile on her lips, 'but such could not be the case—since Nara is near.'

'Ah, pearl, we can claim nothing until it is really our own, nor can we feel certain of possessing a thing until it is entirely in our own possession.'

Asta's face regained its sunny expression.

'In not having Almos,' she said, 'I hold more happiness than any bride can boast of to-day.'

'But if misfortune should keep Nara from you, no regret, however great, could undo this deception, and make you the wife of Almos,' Vanita retorted, rocking herself to and fro in her anxiety.

Again the soft, dreamy smile came to Asta's lips, and a tender brightness made her eyes sparkle with intensified beauty. She stretched out her arms with a gesture of earnestness.

'Mother, I shall never regret not being the bride of Almos,' she said. 'If misfortune should prevent my marriage, heavy as my humiliation would be, it would be less irksome for me to bear than to know myself the wife of another than Nara.'

It was the test of her devotion to Nara, and she withstood it triumphantly.

Nor did her spirit again droop to dejection

when, day after day, nothing was said to her concerning the plans made for her future. The last bell had gone from the silver zone, and she was satisfied.

Nara visited Rukmin every evening, and formal visits had been exchanged between the latter and Zarrin ; and the ceremonious calls were followed by a more familiar intercourse.

It seemed to Asta that an important scheme was being privately discussed, and she waited patiently for its development ; for, being under the impression that it concerned Nara, she felt that it must also concern herself.

Anticipating the happiest issue, she took a pride in attending to her personal appearance, in robing herself in bright raiment, and in twining fresh flower chaplets in her dark rich, bronze-shot hair.

Once or twice she caught the sound of Nara's mellow voice, and in it her quick ears detected an unmistakable note of contentment. And Nara's contentment was her own.

But as yet there had come no token from Zarrin's wife Isita, and this circumstance made everything more inexplicable to the girl, who was waiting for events to come to a climax. However, as soon as Hiran and his family, including Almos and Kameena, were on their journey to the frontier village of Tibet—Nilang

—which place Hiran, for trading purposes, had made his headquarters, invitations were issued for a wedding between Zarrin's eldest son and the remaining daughter of Rukmin's house.

The usual excitement and flutter followed. Congratulatory visits were made by the women, and Isita was charmed with her son's future wife, and gazed with delight at Asta's radiant face, while she clasped tenderly in her own the girl's small satin-soft hands.

'There could not be found anywhere a sweeter wife for my son,' Isita said, with sincerity. 'It will give me unbounded pleasure to place on this dear little wrist the iron bangle—and may it long remain there!'

'Thank you for the kind wish,' Asta replied; 'I shall feel greatly blessed in having for my husband your son, and I will serve him with obedience and faithfulness all my life. The reward of my devotion will be in knowing that I am his and he is mine, and no better reward could I have on earth than this knowledge.'

In her happiness Asta was entrancingly beautiful. Under the delicate arch of her brows her eyes, deep, eloquent, and silken-lashed, shone with bewitching animation, and when she smiled a dimple danced, like a tiny sunbeam, from the warm curve of her mouth to her dainty chin, and then flitted up and

lost itself in the satiny softness of her cheek.

The decorated platform was again erected under the flowered branches of the flame-of-the-forest, and the musicians once more assembled with their instruments of music. The dancers waited in readiness to perform, and bamboo arches, from which were suspended festoons of strung flowers, intersected with tiny earthen lamps to be lighted at night, made the front of Rukmin's house a scene of approaching festivity. Over the parapet was draped a crimson cloth, and along the top had been placed a row of tiny earthen lamps, which, when lit, would look like a chain of stars. A few dome-shaped paper lanterns, with long tinsel streamers hanging from them, revolved gently in the breeze under the shade of the flowery tree-branches, on which they were strung.

And at last the day dawned on which Asta, arrayed in her silk bridal-robe, heard with feelings of thankfulness the sound of her marriage-music—the tom-toms, the trumpets, the sitar, and, louder than all, the hollow-roaring sankh. •

Her heart throbbed to the beat of the drums, and in her ears the timbrels and trumpets sounded sweet, for they announced the great triumph of her life.

Oh, thrice happy bride who could meet with such tender faith her eager bridegroom! Fearing naught, Asta could contemplate a life of wedded contentment. It was not her fate to go bewildered and dismayed to a stranger. It was her lot to yield herself in perfect trustfulness to a favoured one whose voice and look she knew, and whom she had chosen as a very prince above princes for herself—her prince of righteousness.

The drums pulsed, the marine shell gave forth its triumphal roar, and a hundred voices uttered words of goodwill. Through the confused strains, she heard, as an undersong, the oft-repeated expression: '*Khush raho, khush raho!*' (May you be happy!) And she felt that she could never be otherwise than joyous.

Sitting on a seat of state borne by two attendants, she was carried from the women's penetralia to the chambers of worship, and, closely veiled, was placed at the left side of Nara. She seemed to have reached the summit of human bliss when, after the priest had bound her hand to Nara's with a garland of flowers, and her direct line of descent, as well as his, had been proclaimed, she heard Nara utter, in a firm yet gentle voice, the marriage response:

'I have received her.'

Then, while a silk veil was held over their

heads, they gazed, for the first time for many days, into each other's eyes. One long, deep look, and then Asta's eyes were hidden under their tremulous lids, and Nara had to content himself with the shy droop of her lashes on her satiny cheeks.

'I have received her,' he had said.

What sweet magic lay in those few soft-spoken words! She was his for evermore—for evermore! No one could part them; no one should come between them. He, her prince, had received her, and henceforth their lives would continue together in complete unison. By his own wit and steadfastness, by his watchful devotion, Nara had won his lady of the silver zone, Asta, and to him she would be perpetually as one above the price of rubies.

Now that Brinda understood the intrigue, she approved of the scheme which had been so successfully carried out. She considered it fitting that a zemindar's daughter should have married a zemindar's son; and Nara was in every way a better match than Almos for Asta, since, as Nara's wife, Asta would be able to remain near her parents in the Doon, instead of being taken to some far-off frontier village. And as no one had been harmed through the transaction, no blame could be attached to Rukmin for having devised the plot. On the

other hand, he was to be commended for having promoted the happiness of Kameena, who otherwise would have gone through her life bemoaning her sad position.

To Brinda it was evident that every one concerned in the proceeding had been prompted to action by fate, and Isita, who already loved Asta for her tender looks and sweet ways, was of the same opinion.

And weeks later, when Kameena felt herself to be indispensable to her husband, she first gained his assurance that he would not cast her off, and then gently imparted to him the secret.

Almos treated it as a matter of small consequence.

'My wife is my wife,' was his quiet answer. 'Knowing her to be of honourable birth and suitable caste, I care not that another than her father gave her as his daughter. Had I, seeing you, been able to choose even from a thousand, I should have chosen yourself.'

Thankful that the burden was lifted from her mind, Kameena's contentment increased tenfold, and she devoted herself more entirely to pleasing her husband and keeping his favour. It was not a difficult task, for after his exile among the Tibetans, he appreciated Kameena's companionship and delighted in his freedom

from captivity. The world seemed new to him, and his life was full of satisfaction.

After reflecting on the secret imparted to him by Kameena, he decided it would be better not to disclose it to Hiran.

'My father in his wrath might banish the light of my eyes from me,' Almos said to Kameena, 'and that would drive me to the worst despair. We will keep the secret. If men suspect, let them suspect; if women prate, let them prate. I shall not make the truth public, lest by doing so I lose you.'

'It would kill me to be parted from you,' Kameena replied, shuddering at the mere thought of a possible separation; 'I would rather die this very moment at your feet than, living, be set apart from you.'

'I, too, would sooner abandon myself to death than give you up,' he replied. 'We will remain silent on the subject until in the fullness of time you have given me a son, and thereby made our marriage safe. There would be no question then as to who should be my wife.'

'And as I came richly dowered to you, you suffered no loss by the transaction,' she remarked practically. 'None can say that you were wronged.'

'The entire matter was one of gain to me,'

Almos said, 'for I should not have cared to take a wife who had come to me unwillingly.'

'As my cousin would surely have done!' Kameena exclaimed, with quick jealousy, lest by chance he should hanker after Asta. 'I know that day after day she used to watch from the roof-parapet for the passing of another than yourself, while I remained always within the house benefiting by the good advice that was given me.'

He frowned. She had sent a barb through the weak point in the armour of his self-esteem, his vanity. He felt that he hated Asta.

'A woman who spent her time in watching for the going by of another than myself would not have suited me,' he replied, in a tone of distaste. 'It is evident I was fortunate in being prevented from having so bold a wife.'

And Kameena smiled with satisfaction to know she had banished any regrets he might have entertained with regard to Asta, who in very reality had looked out for the passing of no man but Nara.

CHAPTER XII

BY FIRE

MONTH followed month. The trees that had borne fruit-blossom at the time of Asta's marriage had yielded their ripe product. The corn-crops had been gathered in, and seed once more sown; the tea-leaf had been again plucked and dried; and the season of rain, bringing torrents from the mountains, had sent countless narrow streams coursing through the valley—streams that were soon scorched dry under the mid-September sun. Scorched, too, were the delicate tree-ferns, which, nurtured by the incessant raindrops, had grown on the bark of the forest branches, enveloping them as in a transparent mantle of emerald lace.

October had come—dry, bright, sultry—the month for which Vanita had waited, that she might perform a fiery penance for the part she had played with regard to the deception that had been practised upon Hiram and his son.

Only at one period of the year could she go

through the ordeal by fire, and she had waited for this day on which she hoped to take upon herself the burden of the sin, and make full atonement, not only for herself, but for her husband.

Having passed the morning in fasting, at one hour past midday Vanita, with her head uncovered and her face unveiled, sat on the ground in a motionless attitude, a penitent sinner, supporting on the palm of each hand an earthen plate filled with enkindled rosin. For half an hour she remained absolutely without motion, other than that caused by her respiration, while she felt on her face the fierce heat of the rosin, and the earthen platters, becoming hotter every moment, imparted a burning sensation as of live coals in the hollow of her hands. Every muscle in her body ached with the strain of remaining in one fixed posture. Yet she sat there, still as a statue, unflinching, unfearing, and silent.

The rosin burned redder and redder as she remained thus in holy meditation, inwardly praying that, by her suffering and repentance, pardon might be vouchsafed to her for her sin and Rukmin's, and that no evil might come of their deceit.

When her penance was ended, and the plates of fire were no longer in her hands, she gazed

at her scorched palms and saw that the flesh was unbranded.

Her features, which had remained rigid during the test, relaxed their strained expression, and a look of exceeding gladness leapt to her eyes. She accepted the absence of the fiery mark as a sign that she had gained Divine forgiveness, and her heart swelled with silent praise.

With a salutary sense of newly acquired innocence, she rose slowly to her feet, assured that the severe ordeal had not been in vain. By the fieriness of the trial she had been freed from her guilt, and she felt assured that no punishment would follow Rukmin or Asta.

And a few hours later, with a clean conscience and in fair, fresh raiment, Vanita took in her arms the boy Rukmin had adopted—the orphan son, now eight months old, of Gondal, the man who had died of plague.

‘Dear little son,’ she crooned, as the baby smiled and caressed her, ‘now, indeed, I am fit to rear you so that you will be a credit to your ancestors!’

Seating herself, she placed him on a cushion near her, and watched him contentedly, as he lay on his back playing with a small lacquered wooden toy.

Rukmin, on his part, had appeased his con-

science by making a pilgrimage to the sacred bathing ghāt at Hardwar, and by bestowing money upon the priests. He knew he was accountable only for his artifice towards Hiran and Almos. Everything else had been forcibly worked out by destiny. And by giving liberally in charity he had paid the price of his stratagem. His mind was at peace. Had he been confronted now by Hiran or his son, and accused of the deception, Rukmin, as a destinist, would have answered :

‘Blame fate, not me. No man can avert the current of events in a human life, any more than he can turn the tide of the deep seas, or change the course of the wind. I am mortal ; I could not prevent that which, established by Divine decree, became an invincible necessity.’

Some such thoughts as these were in Rukmin’s mind as, on the night following Vanita’s fiery ordeal, he stood outside his home in the moonlight, with the warm, silvery stillness surrounding him.

Near him was a spreading jasmine-bush, the fragrant blossom of which showed like a shower of white stars against the dark leaves. The odour of the flowers scented the air.

Rukmin gazed towards the vast mountains, that towered their crests in black relief against the resplendent sky ; the sombre wooded

heights, beyond which ranged, like a white world, the mighty Himalayan glacier-chain, with its icy pinnacles penetrating the clouds twenty-four thousand feet above the level of the sea ; the inaccessible snow-wrapped elevation that, from sunrise to sunset, reflected the translucent splendour of the sky ; the glistening summits, that changed their hue from white to opal, from opal to topaz, from topaz to palest coral, from coral to amethyst, and then again revealed their cold, eternal, rigid colourlessness ; the frozen, unapproachable peaks, which sloped down into the spotless ice-cavern, from whence emerged, clear as a cascade of crystal, the sacred Ganges, the River of Purity, that, rippling down from gigantic heights, proceeded in small streams through the Doon, and wound along the plains until the divided flow joined the ruffled waters of the Jumna.

As Rukmin, alone with the night, stood in quiet contemplation, his gaze travelled along the sky, so illimitable, so serene, so full of majesty ; and as he watched the moon-silvered cloud-drifts sailing over the silent surface, the glamour of the night descended upon him, and the very immensity of the firmament seemed to speak to him. He imagined that from out the celestial regions fell words, soft in their passage as falling stars :

'Behold! the munificent Earth and the replenishing Sky, the lucent Day and the refreshing Night, bestow their bountifulness equally upon all mankind; yet, from the world's living multitudes, endless hosts, perceiving not the Beauteous Benevolence, strive against each other in a dense labyrinth, and, trampling blindly upon the heel of Misery, grope in vain for the garland of Joyance. But discerning wanderers, who, seeing the Guiding Gleam, follow it with Love, find, up-blossoming in their path, the rose-hued flowers of an ever-present Happiness.'

Wrapped in the enfolding mystery of the night, and feeling the force of Infinity, Rukmin turned towards his house, and as he walked along in the flood of moonlight the atmosphere seemed charged with an encompassing benediction that circled round the whole of humanity: '*Tumhari jai ho!*' (Joy be with you!) In the nocturnal hush the significance of the phrase impelled itself to his mind, until from every direction seemed to come the supreme invocation of gladness: '*Tumhari jai ho! Tumhari jai ho!*'

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PART II

THE DEPARTED CITY

THE NARRATION BY WHICH NARA GAINED THE
LAST BELL FROM THE SILVER ZONE



THE SIX-PETALLED LOTUS LILY

THE CITY OF JEWELS

AS RELATED BY NARA TO RUKMIN

‘ MORE than two thousand years ago, on a plain thirty miles from what is now the district of Dehra Doon, there was built a town so rich in splendour that it resembled a bower of precious stones, and was called the City of Jewels. Its surrounding walls of carved granite were amply fortified, and its principal houses, erected in the midst of bowery gardens, were designed on a scale of unprecedented magnificence, the roofs being supported on ivory columns inlaid with silver, the halls having walls of interlaced sandal-wood embellished with mother-of-pearl, while the massive marble and sandstone portals sparkled with an ornamentation wrought in gems of every variety.

‘ By day and night there came on the incense-perfumed air the beat of the tabor, mingled with the soft music of stringed instruments and the reverent chanting of the Vedas. The broad streets were thronged with horse-chariots and riding-elephants, decorated with cloth of

gold. Ambassadors and merchants from divers countries rode unmolested through the fortified gates of the city, and were saluted respectfully by the trident-bearing warriors who formed a line of guard outside the buttressed walls.

‘Among the dwellers in the city no man practised a calling not his own, no person was without relations, and nobody knew want. In the centre of the town stood a huge golden tablet, on which were engraved laws that were never broken—laws forbidding the sacrificing of animals, the wilful destruction of trees, the wanton removal of landmarks, and all kinds of misappropriation likely to cause strife. In every home there was contentment. No epidemic disease fouled the air, no citizen gave in charity less than he could afford to bestow, and no home was without the perpetual fire.

‘Over this region of peace reigned a King named Magna. Versed in the Vedas, loving justice, and skilled in archery and all such sports that became a King, Magna was beloved by his subjects, and in the noisy streets crowds would bend their foreheads in reverence as, in his golden chariot drawn by six swift steeds, he passed along the fountained ways to and from his glittering, seven-storied palace.

‘Throughout his kingdom Magna was renowned for his benevolence. During each day

he spent several hours in making plans for the benefit of his subjects, and in holding consultation with his chosen priests and twelve learned Brahmins, who were always near to counsel him in matters of State importance.

‘But there came a night during which the King, a prey to anxiety on his only son’s account, and unable to sleep, paced sadly on the pavilioned roof. The Court serenaders, playing lightly on their instruments and singing softly of deeds of glory performed by Magna’s ancestors, failed to soothe him into a restful mood. Each slumber-inviting song, modulated to harmonize with the starriness and repose of the night, fell short of driving the look of unrest from his face, and the next morning he charioted dejectedly from the palace. His devoted courtiers wore reflected on their brows the sadness of Magna’s heart; they knew that, with all his splendour, all his regal peace and power, he was more downcast in spirit than his lowliest subject, for his son, little Prince Vivad, had been seized with an unknown malady, from which it seemed he would perish.

‘Religious rites were performed, and prayers were offered up for the Prince’s restoration to health, but every succeeding hour the malady took a more deadly hold upon the child, and his

beauty and strength continued to fade, until he lay like one in the very grip of death.

‘It happened that Magna had, as his constant companion, a misshapen charioteer, a hideous black dwarf called Tarjan, whose presence was supposed to have a talismanic influence over the King, protecting him against a foretold calamity which would destroy his kingdom. On this account the dwarf was able to exert over Magna more sway than the priests and courtiers, and when at times the King ignored his other advisers, he would listen with attention to the words of his diminutive, malformed chariot-driver.

‘In addition to Prince Vivad, who was in his seventh year, Magna possessed a daughter about sixteen years of age, Princess Sainthia, who was extremely precious in his sight, and whose countenance was so wondrously bright that her beauty dazzled the eyes of all who beheld her.

‘Spoiled and petted by every one in the palace, Princess Sainthia, sweet-tempered and gracious to all but the dwarf, evinced towards Tarjan an antipathy which was too dominant to be disguised. The appearance of his large, massive head, fang-like teeth, crooked torso, and stunted limbs, filled her with loathing, and whenever she saw him she uttered a cry of

fear, and hid herself from his ugly gaze ; for in those ancient days there was in force no custom compelling women to veil their faces, and Sainthia's lovely features were left uncovered when, accompanied by a hundred richly attired slave-girls, armed with long tasselled spears, she wandered at will about the palace grounds.

‘Often while walking in the flowery garden she would start in alarm to see his monstrous head thrust between the tender sprays of blossom, and she would then command her spear-maidens to form a living wall round her, until the dwarf, unable to view her through the lattice of weapons, withdrew in fiendish rage, as much against her as against his own deformity that made him obnoxious in her sight. For her beauty had roused in him a secret covetousness which was like a canker corroding his heart and corrupting his brain.

‘From her earliest infancy the Princess had displayed this repugnance towards Tarjan, and the mere print of his crooked feet marked in the garden sand was sufficient to make her shudder and turn her steps in another direction.

• ‘Every effort he had made to appear less repellent to her had failed ; and latterly he had contemplated her with a look of baffled desire and revengeful unrest, which made his distorted features more hideously repulsive.

‘But with the King, who saw not into the treacherous heart of his charioteer, Tarjan always found grace, since, according to the great prophecy, as long as the dwarf remained near no harm would befall Magna, who otherwise would perish by a calamity which would scatter his wealth as dust, and lay his kingdom low in the bowels of the earth.

‘In his grief over the illness of his son the King derived no solace from the sympathy of his courtiers, and in his sorrow turned to Tarjan for advice, hoping that the dwarf’s talismanic influence would, in this hour of dire necessity, prevail.

‘As the King was whirled along in his chariot, with his brow resting on his hand in an attitude of dejection, he cast a wistful glance now and then at Tarjan, who held the gold-embossed reins masterfully in his sinewy hands, while he lashed the horses to a rapid pace.

‘At length the King exclaimed :

“Tell me, O charioteer! how can my son be saved?”

‘And the dwarf answered :

“By sacrifice alone can be saved the son of Your Excellent Majesty.”

“So you have assured me each hour since the beginning of my son’s strange illness,” the King remarked. Then, raising his hand and

pointing towards the palace, he said with calm despair: "But even now from the highest turret streams the white banner, the signal that the Prince's condition is unchanged!"

'The dwarf flashed his evil eyes for an instant in the direction of the colourless flag.

"It is as I expected," he observed, in the harsh, croaking voice that always made Princess Sainthia shudder.

"How so?" Magna asked. "Have you not declared that sacrifice alone was needed? and have I not already performed consecratory rites, accompanied by prayer that my son might be restored to health?"

"Your Majesty has done as Your Majesty has said," the dwarf croaked. "But is not the Prince's unchanged condition a sign that the sacrifices have not been acceptable?"

"It seems so," the King said regretfully; "yet I have presented the best I could offer."

"The best?" and a diabolical gleam came into Tarjan's eyes. "Your Majesty has sacrificed incense, flowers, fruit, grass, and grain; but," he continued, with a sinister lowering of his knotted eyebrows, "may not a more precious offering be required on the Prince's behalf?"

'The King looked perplexed.

"I have bestowed upon the Brahmins golden caskets filled with priceless gems," he replied.

"What can I offer of greater value—unless I resign my kingdom?"

'The dwarf hideosity made no answer. His grip tightened on the reins, fretting the mouths of the horses so that they reared and plunged in their effort to break from the restraint.

'The King discerned that Tarjan had conceived some plan which he was keeping to himself.

"Speak, charioteer!" Magna commanded; "if you know of a fitter sacrifice, name it. There is no time for delay; my only son is at point of death!"

"Your Majesty, it is not for me to usurp the office of a holy adviser," the dwarf muttered, with mock humility; "it would be presumptuous for me—a charioteer—to act the part of priest. However, since I have received the sovereign command, I express obediently my humble opinion to the effect that a sacrifice, not of mere flowers and fruit, or grain and grass, but of blood, is required."

"It is forbidden," Magna retorted, looking with haughty disapproval at the dwarf. "The shedding of blood is prohibited by the law written on the Golden Tablet, inscribed there by my command."

"Most Gracious Majesty, laws are made for subjects, not for kings," Tarjan retorted craftily.

'Magna reflected for a moment, and then replied :

"True, charioteer! Name the sacrifice, and, since the gods desire an offering of blood, a noble beast shall be prepared for immolation."

'Tarjan lowered his rugged brows until his eyes were like two narrow, gleaming slits in his hideous face.

"I crave Your Majesty's pardon," he said, "but the noblest beast in this royal domain would not suffice. For a life so precious as the Prince's, a life of equal value to Your Majesty should be surrendered."

'Magna started, and scrutinized the dwarf's countenance.

"Not your life, Tarjan?" Magna exclaimed, realizing with sharp misgiving that a human sacrifice was needed.

"Not mine, noble monarch!" the dwarf replied, while a hellish look flickered from his narrowed eyes.

"My life, perhaps?" the King suggested; "since to me my son's life is of equal value to my own."

• 'And the dwarf replied :

"Being the sacrificer, Your Majesty cannot be the sacrificed."

'Magna pondered deeply over the matter until the chariot entered the palace gateway.

Rapidly alighting, he went directly to the darkened room in which his son lay breathing painfully and gazing with dulled eyes at his surroundings.

'At the foot of the Prince's couch knelt his mother, Queen Jasoda, who, while gazing upon him with sorrowful affection, clasped to her bosom his listless feet.

'Bending near his pillow stood Princess Sainthia, appearing even lovelier than usual in a costly white diaphanous robe embroidered with golden lotus-lilies, and wearing on her brow a rare chrysolite—a marvellous gem of a delicate, pure leaf-green colour that scintillated with every movement of her head. Girding her robe to her hips was a pure gold band, four fingers wide, with clinks and tassels.

'The room, protected at the portals by guards armed with spiked maces, was lined with gorgeous-vestured attendants, some waving large fans, others sprinkling rose-leaves and rose-water to cool and scent the apartment. Near a doorway of carved sandal-wood stood two Brahmins who were skilled in medicine and the art of healing the sick; they watched the Prince attentively, and now and then consulted as to what should be done to restore the brightness of health to his failing body.

‘As silently as a snake creeps from its skin, Tarjan had followed the King into the room.

‘Not having observed the dwarf’s entrance, Princess Sainthia made a shuddering movement as she suddenly caught sight of his repellent form. The repugnance she always felt in his company took possession of her, and uttering an involuntary exclamation of aversion, she put up her hands to shield her eyes from his hated image, and fled from the room.

‘With a sinister expression on his face, the dwarf watched her as she made her retreat; but otherwise he gave no sign of having observed the repugnance with which she had shunned his presence.

‘The King, not glancing beyond his son, bent over the boy, and in a voice that trembled with emotion, murmured :

“Light of my kingdom, is your strength returning? Has the pain departed?”

‘Prince Vivad shook his head languidly.

“I am dying,” he answered, “and I wish to live to be a glorious King like my father.”

“My only son! my beloved boy!” the King groaned, “whatever sacrifice is in my power, I will perform to save you.”

‘Raising the Prince in his arms, Magna strained him passionately to his breast, and a

heart-wrung sob broke from the King's throat. For what to him would be the world if it held not his son?

'Queen Jasoda, observing the deathly look on the child's face, and sympathizing with the King in his anguish, wept unrestrainedly, and smote her bosom repeatedly with her clenched hands; and all the attendants present uttered lamentations, while outside the palace the courtyards and streets of the city became as echoing passages of sorrow, for swiftly the news had spread that the life of the Prince was at its lowest ebb.

'In her agonized desire for her son's life to be saved, the Queen raised her arms despairingly, and cried out to her afflicted husband:

"If your son, the light of your kingdom, can be saved by immolation of myself, I yield my life gladly in sacrifice!"

'Magna turned his heavy gaze sadly upon her face.

"These are wild words," he said. "Refrain from such soul-tearing frenzy, lest I have to bear two sorrows instead of one."

'The dwarf, who had not schemed that the Queen should be sacrificed, approached stealthily within a few yards of her, and, rubbing his hands slowly together, remarked craftily:

“Such syllables of self-obliteration match not the pomp of a Queen.”

‘Through her tears she flashed him a look of burning scorn.

“What is the pomp of a Queen compared with the love of a mother?” she exclaimed. “Of what worth are a Queen’s possessions when her hair whitens if she holds not a son?” And again she cried out wildly: “Let my life be presented in sacrifice, that the Prince may be spared!”

‘The dwarf went a step nearer to her, his eyelids lowered with a devilish expression. It was against his desire that she should be the victim.

“Reflect, O Queen! on the agony of the offering,” he muttered.

‘Queen Jasoda answered with disdain:

“A mother considers not the agony she endures for the life of her child; love tempers her utmost torment.” Then she added, unflinchingly: “I need have but one mortal blow—I who would endure ten thousand death-pangs that so sweet a boy might live.”

‘The King suddenly raised his hand to invoke silence, and several priests, who had been watching from an ante-room, hurried forward to perform a sacred office for the dying child, who, supported in Magna’s arms, was

breathing faintly, as though every breath would be his last.

“The Prince has swooned!” Queen Jasoda exclaimed, unable to suppress her grief. “Alas! if he should die without speaking to me again!”

‘She rushed to the couch, and, in a frenzied manner, clasped the boy’s feet to her bosom; then, releasing from her embrace her expiring child, she flung herself wildly on her knees in front of the priests.

“Let my life be given for his!” she cried. “Take me as an offering, and let the consecratory rite commence. Delay not! delay not! lest the Prince perish before I am accepted in sacrifice.”

‘The priests looked at their monarch; but Magna, bending in suspense over his son, heeded nothing except the fleeting breath of his dying boy.

‘The dwarf went to the King’s side, and in a rasping voice said :

“Your Majesty has heard?”

“I have heard—as in a nightmare,” the King replied.

“What is Your Majesty’s will?” croaked the charioteer.

‘The King quailed, and drops of sweat started to his brow.

“Is it ordained that I must purchase my son’s life at the cost of his mother’s ?” he asked.

‘With a devilish expression in his eyes, Tarjan said :

“Would Your Majesty present in sacrifice a flower which has yielded its last seed ?”

‘The King understood the dwarf’s veiled meaning, and drew a deep breath of relief to know that Queen Jasoda, having passed the flower-time of her life, was not suitable to be offered in sacrifice ; but she was exceedingly dear to him, and his soul had been torn with anguish by the thought that her life might be yielded in exchange for the child’s recovery.

‘At that moment the Prince grew cold, and seemed to cease to breathe.

“My son! my son!” Magna groaned, “how can I save you ?”

‘With subtle design, the dwarf parted the curtains from a casement and disclosed to the King’s view Princess Sainthia, looking fair as the fragrant narcissus, in her white and gold robe, and with the wonderful leaf-green chrysolite, shedding its lustre over her lovely forehead. She had wandered out upon a marble terrace, and was standing in an attitude of meditation, calm, grave, motionless, her soft, luminous eyes full of concentrated sadness on her brother’s account.

‘The dwarf watched her, with his eyes aflame with the insatiable lust of hate that had leapt up from the frustrated lust of love.

“There is little time in which to decide,” he said. “The Prince is dying—in a few hours his heart will have ceased to beat. . . . Is it to be? . . . The moments fly on rapid wings . . . and once gone, a life cannot return to its mortal frame. Choose, mighty King! A son or a daughter must be surrendered.’

‘With a gasp of horror and wrath, the King drew swiftly from his jewelled waist-cloth an unsheathed dagger, and brandished it in the direction of the dwarf, at the same time exclaiming:

“Begone, fiend, lest I plunge this poisoned weapon into your vile heart!”

‘Without flinching, the dwarf encountered the King’s furious gaze, and with potent irony said:

“Strike, O King! if it be Your Majesty’s will, since this poor, crooked body was formed but for great Magna’s pleasure and”—his eyes glittered with horrible cunning—“preservation.”

‘Breathing heavily, the King replaced the dagger in his waistcloth, while he continued to glare with fierce menace into the mocking eyes of the dwarf, to whose talismanic pre-

sence Magna remembered he owed the safety of his life and of his kingdom.

'At that moment consciousness returned to Prince Vivad, and he repeated the words :

' "I do not want to die ! Don't let me die !"

'Magna went to the child's side and tried to comfort him, while the dwarf, with his head bent and his arms folded across his chest, regarded the King with secret rancour.

'A fit of shivering took possession of the Prince, and the pulsation of his heart grew fainter and fainter, while his features assumed an ashen hue.

'Seeing the unmistakable signs of approaching death in the child's face, Magna turned in agony of mind to the attendant priests.

' "Counsel your unhappy monarch," he exclaimed. 'Must one precious life be purchased at the price of another as dear ?"

'And the foremost priest answered : "It is impossible even for a King to hold constantly the treasures he most prizes."

' "Then let me lose all except my son," Magna said, his voice hoarse with anguish. "If I must be deprived of one of my beloved children, take my daughter, and leave me my cherished boy."

'An awful silence followed his words.

'The dwarf's eyes glittered with a viperish

gleam, and his breath came and went in hissing gasps between his long, protuding teeth. He still held the curtain back from the casement that revealed the terrace on which stood Princess Sainthia, beyond hearing distance of what passed within the room. His fingers twitched convulsively with the working of his brain, and on the back of his hands the veins swelled until they were like knotted cords under his shrivelled, black skin.

"Your Majesty has decided well," he muttered. "If your sovereign desire is carried into immediate execution the Prince will be saved."

'Hearing the terrible words, Queen Jasoda stretched out her arms appealingly to the King, and then with a deathlike cry fell prone upon the ground in a trance, from which, for several hours, she could not be roused.

'Grasping his son's icy hand, the King sank upon a seat near the couch, the sweat of his anguish beading his brow, while a whirling darkness seemed to roll before his sight, obscuring from his gaze everything around him.

'As in a horrible nightmare, he heard the voice of one of the priests saying :

"The deed of a man who acts for the sake of sacrifice is dissolved. . . . The wise grieve

neither for the dead nor for the living, and to believe that the spirit can kill or be killed is to err in judgment."

'And Magna heard another priest say: "Remember, mighty King, that the weapon which can cleave the body cannot destroy the vital essence. Freed from its cloak of flesh and blood, the soul rises to join the Immortal Spirit from which it issued, and of which it has never ceased to be a part."

'And a third priest said: "Without sacrifice there can be no desirable requital, no remission of sin. . . . The giver is the receiver. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the recompense."

'But the King derived no comfort from the words, and his soul was wrapped in direst anguish as he sat motionless as a statue of stone by the side of his son.

'And as a snake watches its unsuspecting prey, Tarjan watched the Princess.

'Preparations were at once commenced for the human offering, and Princess Sainthia, not understanding what was desired of her, did as she was directed, thinking only that some slight religious ceremony, in which she was to participate, was to be performed on behalf of the Prince.

'Yet, when arrayed in a robe of spun-gold

gauze, and crowned with a chaplet of white blossoms of the sacred moon-plant, she listened to the weird music which was played as she was conveyed to the chamber of sacrifice, a dawning fear chilled her body, and she began to wonder what part she was to play in an offering of blood; for she saw in the chamber the unmistakable arrangements for a living oblation.

‘But where was the victim? In vain Sainthia looked for a dumb, flower-decked animal; but no chosen beast seemed to have been prepared for immolation. The hall into which she had been brought was red with the glow of numerous consecrated fires, some small, others large, and each bearing a separate significance. In the hot glare she saw the Queen, whose face was rigid as in death, standing beside the King, an unnatural calm making her mute and motionless, her senses having been dulled by some subtle drug.

‘As Sainthia gazed upon the surrounding scene her eyes dilated with affrightment. Her fear was intensified to uttermost horror when, after several processions had been formed round the fires, she was conveyed in a car of sacred wood, drawn by priests, to an altar, the priests chanting incessantly, their voices first wildly exultant, then weirdly dirge-like, the vocal

sounds gradually swelling until they burst into a roar of frenzied enthusiasm.

‘Sainthia screamed shrilly in her terror as she was taken from thence to the lofty, two-pronged sacrificial post, which was surmounted by a flag and decked with flowers and streamers. There was wafted about her the hot perfume of incense as a scented fire was carried three times round her; then a sign was made for the slayers to commence their operations.

‘The air grew thicker with the sound of horribly descriptive music and the chant of many voices—voices that outsounded the startled screams which broke from her lips as she realized for what purpose she had been conveyed to the many-fired hall. She—the King’s daughter—had been brought as an offering to the gods. Oh, what indescribable anguish that knowledge brought to her! It scorched her soul as with wings of fire, and heated the blood in her veins, till she seemed to behold the surrounding scene through a lurid, distorting mist, and her golden robe, bright as though it had been woven from the sun’s rays, appeared to her as a hideous garb of death.

‘Screaming with horror, she glanced from the dreaded sacrificial post to the orange-mantled high-priest, and then looked distractedly at the

King, whose head was bent in a manner to prevent his meeting her gaze. In anguish she turned to the invoking priest, who stood near her, his own special fire burning close by in an earthen ring. Keeping his gaze fixed upon the red embers, he seemed not to notice her, and continued to recite the awful words which pronounced her doom—the doom that was described by the weirdly pulsating chords of music rising and falling on the stifling air.

‘In the fierce fire-glow she caught sight of Tarjan, whose features were distorted by an expression of gloating vengeance, which made him look more abhorrent than he had hitherto appeared. His fanged mouth was curling with a diabolical grin, and his eyes were glittering with fiendish satisfaction as he watched her shuddering in anguish between life’s extremity and death’s sharp probe.

‘In the heat of the oppressive atmosphere she became icy cold, cold as the scimitar that, in readiness for her slaughter, was being thrice whetted by men whose faces were shrouded in saffron-coloured cloth containing network apertures through which their eyes flashed with demoniacal intensity. The whetters performing their horrible task might have been men of holy order; but to Princess Sainthia they seemed to be devils promoting her blood-

shed, and the fire-illuminated hall appeared a region of infernal torment.

‘Absorbed in religious fervour, and with an expression of magnificent surrender on his features, stood the King, the sacrificer, his ears deaf to the frenzied cries of his victim, his eyes closed against her anguish. Surrounding her were priests, holding in their hands cups of soma-juice, the subtly intoxicating drink proffered to the gods, and quaffed by the sacrificer and the administrators of the offering.

“In the name of all that is holy, cease these awful preparations!” Sainthia shrieked. “In the sublime name of Yama, the merciful god of death, I implore you not to slay me!”

‘Her voice only mingled with the sacrificial chant to seem part of it. There was no sign of deliverance for her; no holy man responded to her entreaties for her life to be spared. Eight of the awful saffron-shrouded figures came forward—four with cords to bind her hands together, four with ropes to fasten together her feet. As the terrible figures approached, she recoiled with repugnance and fell upon her knees, extending her hands in frantic supplication:

“O human hearts, are you wholly without compassion? . . . And you, O my father, will you not withdraw this unnatural offering? I,

your unwilling victim, prostrate myself before you as before a god of power, since one word from your royal lips, one sign from your royal hand, can deliver me from destruction."

'Her voice was drowned in the wailing music. If for a moment she was heard, no attention was paid to her cry for deliverance.

'The supreme moment of sacrifice was drawing near. Higher and higher rose the voices of the chanters and singers; more and more weird became the strains of instrumental music; louder and louder grew the clangour of gongs, the ringing of bells; redder and redder burned the fires.

'The eight men holding the binding cords stood, like sentries, four on either side; while, more terrible than all the rest, there moved slowly towards her a shrouded man, with his arms raised above his head, and supporting in his open palms the newly anointed sword, short, strong, curved, and broadest at the point-end.

'The life of the Princess Sainthia was at its narrowest extremity; only one dexterous blow from the convex-edged blade would be required, and then, slain, she would be bound to the flower-decked post.

'Her frenzied gaze became riveted on the scimitar that, held aloft in the firm outspread

palms, flashed redly in the glow of the numerous fires. In imagination she saw the blade dripping with the life-flow of her spilled blood; in soul-curdling anticipation she seemed to see the slayer's arms trembling with the force of the one efficient blow; the assemblage wildly astir with fanatic exultation.

'Swiftly she put her hands over her eyes to shut out the ghastly vision, then, as quickly uncovering her eyes, she turned frantically to the priests who had brought her into the midst of the horrible sacrificial scene.

"Oh, hearts of fire," she cried, "let the dew of pity quench your flames! Hearts of iron, melt now with compassion! Spare me! I am at your mercy—and life is sweet—life is sweet! Oh, spare me!"

'There was no response to her appeal, and again her voice penetrated the din, while, prostrating herself, she beat her forehead upon the ground till her delicate, blue-veined temples were bruised with the repeated blows.

"Save me, O priestly ones!" she shrieked. "Render unto me the mercy that I crave; for I was not born to be wedded to that cruel knife. Such as I am, I was formed, not to embrace death, but to yield life. O worshippers! what are you that you resign me to a slayer? . . . Ah no! the awful knife shall not

sever my body! No, no! I will not be slain! I will not be slain!"

'The words were choked in her throat by her panting breath, and, beside herself with anguish, she sprang to her feet, her form convulsed with terror, her eyes protruding from their sockets, her lips whiter than ashes.

'The eight men bearing the ropes made a movement as though to pinion her. Uttering a wild scream, she sprang back, and, with all her roused blood revolting against its own spilling, stood at bay.

"If a life must be offered, not mine that life," she shrieked—"not mine that life!"

'Already she seemed to feel the sharp blade cutting into her flesh—the blade that was still lying across the open palms of the grim horror who was adding his muffled chant to the volume of weird noise.

'As she faced the terrible figure her cheeks sank in with dread, and her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth, so that she could utter no other sound than that which came of her laboured breathing. She felt as though her heart must burst from her bosom, as though her brain must turn as she contemplated her hideous doom.

'Soon, pitifully soon, she would be pinioned in the toils of death. Soon the scimitar would

descend upon her neck, and, amid the exultation of all present, her life-blood would gush forth, and the reeking blade would have severed her head from her body.

‘And what would follow that deed of bloodshed? What would be the concluding ceremony when she . . .? Her brain grew too dizzy to form an idea of the ending scene; her flesh began to creep, her hair to rise; and no longer hoping for mercy from the priestly throng, she turned towards the sacrificial post, and, impelled by a blind, self-saving instinct, she stretched out her arms with a passionate appeal to the invisible death-god:

“O merciful Yama, I entreat thee to save so weak a victim from the knife, to prevent the direful spilling of so wretched a woman’s blood! Great death-king, reject this worthless victim, and accept not my blood in sacrifice!”

‘As Sainthia’s wild words rang amid the turmoil, a sudden flash of lightning rent the sky, and darting down like a flaming serpent, struck the fires into momentary darkness. A deafening peal of thunder followed, and as though smitten by an angry god, the supporter of the consecrated sword shook with a sudden palsy; the weapon dropped from his paralysed hands, and tottering towards the sacrificial post, he sank insensible to the ground. Before those

present could recover from the shock of what had happened, Princess Sainthia hurried away, and reaching the open air, rushed past the guards and fled beyond the city walls to the bank of a river. As she ran she divested herself of her spun-gold robe and flung it into the flowing water; then she tore off her wreath of white moon-flowers and crushed it under her feet, leaving herself draped in a mere nether-robe of muslin, in which she was not likely to be recognized by searchers, who would have set out after her to deliver her once more into the power of the priests.

‘Hastening from the river-side, and running with frantic speed into a forest, she concealed herself effectually by lying against a fallen tree and covering herself with trailing plants, and although a vast number of pursuers were on her track, they passed her by, seeing near the fallen tree only what appeared to be a tangle of trailing woodbines.

‘After seeking for several hours, the searchers, discovering her spun-gold robe and her wreath of moon-flowers floating, torn, in the river, concluded that she had been seized and carried away by an alligator for the purpose of devouring her, and that the vengeance of the outraged gods had thus overtaken her. Being informed of this supposition, and believing it to

be a fact, the King ordered the search to be abandoned ; but to satisfy the Queen he offered a large reward to any man, woman, or child, who would bring to the palace tidings of the Princess, and, should she still be alive, reveal her whereabouts.

‘At nightfall Sainthia was still concealed in her hiding-place behind the trunk of the fallen tree, with the woodbines covering her. Confident that the darkness would screen her during her progress through the forest, she shook off her covering of stems and leaves and proceeded on her pathless way, on through the tearing brambles of the undergrowth, hour after hour, until, overcome by exhaustion, she dropped upon the ground, and pillowing her head upon a rock, fell into a deep sleep.

‘At dawn, when she arose, the events of the previous day were like a diabolical nightmare, from which she had only half awakened. However, it was not long before she realized how real the terrible scene had been, and she felt thankful that she was alive and free, with the smell of the incense no longer in her nostrils, the heat of the fires no longer scorching her eyes and maddening her brain.

‘Having arrived on the spot in darkness, she could not make sure as to the direction from whence she had come. There was no track to

guide her, and fearing lest she might wander unconsciously to the outskirts of the city, she decided to make her home, for the present, under the horizontal branches of a large banyan-tree, that in the course of years had sent down shoots which, when they reached the earth, had taken root, and enlarged into trunks that in their turn had put forth other branches, until a considerable extent of land was covered with natural arches.

‘The roseate hue of the breaking day revealed the beauty of the glade in which she had dropped down, overpowered by exhaustion in the blackness of night. Surrounding the great tree-colonnade were red-blossomed asokas, festooned with twining jasmines, and further off grew trees and shrubs laden with fruits, upon which she could easily subsist. In addition to the fruit, there was a patch of wild corn-cones, the seeds of which had been dropped by birds, or borne thither in a sweeping dust-storm.

‘Having satisfied her hunger by a meal of berries, she gathered up some downy fibre which had fallen from the open pods of a silk-cotton-tree, and carrying the fluffy substance to the inner range of tree-columns, she made a couch upon which, when fatigue overcame her, she could recline in comfort.

‘The following night she slept undisturbed,

but in the greyness of dawn she awoke, parched with fever and thirst, and realized that she had not yet found for herself in her retreat a provision of water. She dared not make her way back to the river that coursed through the city—the river into which she had cast her golden robe and her chaplet of moon-flowers. And as she sat up on her couch of silk-cotton, wondering where she would search for a spring of water, she heard in the stillness of the daybreak the deep-toned, double grunt of a tiger returning to his lair after a night's prowl. Seven times the hollow 'hough-hough' echoed in succession on the air, then there was silence until the sound came from another direction as the fierce, striped beast moved on towards his place of retreat.

'Sainthja shuddered at the sound; but, as she reflected, it was far less affrighting than the terrible noise in the hall of sacrifice from which she had escaped, and the tiger's jaws were preferable to the powerful edge of the cruel convex sword that had been whetted for her destruction.

'Before the sun had risen she formed a cup of thick leaves pinned together with a couple of thorns, and as soon as she had got over her fear of the tiger, went in quest of water, carrying on her shoulder a sheaf of jasmine, from

which she picked off blossoms to drop one by one along the way, so that when she wished to return to the banyan-tree she could follow the path marked by the flowery trail.

'She had proceeded a considerable distance without discovering a stream when she came across a wretched, out-caste man lying asleep on the dry earth. He was garbed in dry leaves and tree-bark, and had branded on his forehead the image of a headless corpse—the ghastly sign that proclaimed him the murderer of a Brahmin, for which crime the marked man was for ever banished from the society of his fellow creatures.

'Suspending her breath with fear, she passed him by, careful to make no sound lest she should awaken him. She shuddered with the knowledge that she was unprotected in the forest, with a corpse-branded out-caste in the vicinity; for the sight of the banished man was more terrifying to her than had been the ferocious grunt of the tiger.

'Dropping a jasmine-flower at every yard, she wandered, hour after hour, deeper and deeper into the woods, until her steps were suddenly arrested by the sound of a forest-Brahmin reciting verses from the Rig-Veda, in which he was giving a youth instruction.

'With a guilty feeling she paused to listen

to the hymn that was being chanted, and the first few words she heard seemed to voice her own loneliness :

“ . . . Have mercy, Almighty—have mercy!

“ If I go trembling along, like a cloud driven by the wind, have mercy, Almighty—have mercy!

“ Through want of strength, I have gone to the wrong shore : have mercy, Almighty—have mercy!

“ Thirst came upon the worshipper, though he stood in the midst of waters : have mercy, Almighty—have mercy!

“ Whenever we men commit an offence before the Heavenly Host ; whenever, through thoughtlessness, we break Thy law, have mercy, Almighty—have mercy. . . .”

‘ As she stood listening to the pathetic acknowledgment of human weakness, Princess Sainthia thought of the abandoned murderer she had seen with the figure of the headless corpse branded on his forehead, and she felt a strange kind of compassion for him, for surely, she reflected, he was in piteous need of the supreme mercy solicited in the Vedic hymn.

‘ Then, conscious of her own physical thirst, she longed to go boldly forward and beg a cup of water from the Brahmin. The impulse was checked by the fear that he might identify her and send word into the city for the priests to come and seize her.

‘With the desire to hide herself, she climbed up into a tree, and peered between the leaves towards the spot from whence came the sound of chanting.

‘Near the columns of a banyan-tree sat the teaching Brahmin, wearing a vesture of deer-skin. At his right hand was his pupil, whose features were stamped with the nobility of earliest manhood, unspoiled by worldly strife. Evidently he was studying to become a religious recluse, intending to live, like his instructor, in the forest.

‘The hermit’s voice had sunk too low for her to distinguish the syllables he uttered; then for a time his tones ceased. But presently she heard him recite a portion of another Vedic hymn, and she followed the words with attention.

“Who is the God to whom we offer our prayers?”

‘And the answer followed :

“He whose power the seas, the rivers, and the snowy mountains proclaim, and to whom these regions are as His very arms.”

‘Again was recited the query :

“Who is the God to whom we shall offer our prayers?”

‘And then came the answer :

“He through whom the sky is bright and the earth firm; He through whom the heaven was established—nay, the highest heaven; He who measured out the light in the air.”

‘Again she heard the refrain :

“Who is the God to whom we shall offer our sacrifice ?”

‘Then followed the response :

“He to whom heaven and earth, standing firm by His will, look up, trembling inwardly. . . . Wherever the mighty water-clouds go; wherever the seed is placed and the fire is lit, thence arises He who is the only light of the bright gods . . . He who is God above all gods.”

‘Then it appeared that the day’s study was ended, for the student rose as though to depart.

‘Fear of being discovered seized Princess Sainthia. Thirsty as she was, and fatigued as she felt after her long search for water, she lacked the daring to enable her to reveal herself to the Brahmin and his pupil.

“Better to die of thirst than to be betrayed to my father and forced back into the city,” was her fearsome thought. And controlling the trembling of her limbs and the chattering of her teeth, she remained concealed in the branches of the tree until, having reverently taken leave of the hermit, the student started on his homeward track. Sainthia watched his

progress. When he had got a few yards away, she saw him stop, and, with the point of his staff, write something on the soil. Directly he had plunged into the deeper growth of the forest, she alighted from the tree and went and looked at the cipher he had made. It was the word "Roshan"—apparently his name which he had traced on the track to guide him when on the morrow he should return to the hermit's abode.

'The sun was near its setting, and, fearing lest she should be overtaken by darkness before she could reach her place of shelter, she hurried back along the jasmine-strewn way, and reached the banyan-tree, beneath an inner arch of which she laid herself to sleep, feeling too feverishly athirst for water to eat any of the berries that were to have formed her supper.

'By the next morning a more intense desire for water urged her, at any risk, to go again in search of a spring. Gathering some fresh jasmine-flowers to drop along her track, she guided herself, by the previous day's faded blossoms, to the tree from the branches of which she had watched the hermit giving instruction to Roshan. Climbing up to the same bough, she saw the hermit and his pupil seated as yesterday, and employed in reading the Rig-Veda. Near them on the ground was a small

earthen vessel half full of water, and as she caught sight of it, she could not refrain from uttering a moan of thirst. Immediately both master and pupil glanced up in her direction.

‘Roshan was the first to speak.

“It was the sound of some poor wanderer in distress,” he remarked; “if you will permit me, I will go and give what aid I can.”

“We will go together,” the Brahmin replied; and they got up and searched for the wanderer whose piteous cry had struck upon their ears.

‘Guided by an unerring instinct, Roshan walked towards the tree, and looked up through the leaves.

‘Realizing that concealment was impossible, Sainthia climbed down and humbly approached the hermit, who had followed Roshan to the spot. •

“Forgive me for intruding upon your solitude,” she said. ‘I have come in search of water; for pity’s sake tell me where I can quench my thirst.”

‘As she spoke she held out her empty leaf-cup, with a pleading, pathetic gesture; and Roshan, who had been watching her intently, first with amazed recognition, then with compassion, hurried away and returned with a jar of fresh water. In her impatience to slake her thirst, she flung down her leaf-cup and made a goblet

of her hands, which she 'extended eagerly to him.

'Roshan held the jar aslant, so that the water flowed into her hands, and as Sainthia bent her face down and drank the welcome draught his gaze was held fascinated by her regal beauty; for even in her torn garment of ungarnished muslin she unconsciously retained the manner and appearance of a princess, and in the thirsty wanderer he had at once recognized King Magna's missing daughter, for whose discovery and transfer to the palace a royal reward had been offered.

'The hermit had no suspicion as to her identity, and in a kindly tone he asked :

"How came you to be alone and thirsty? Have you lost your way in the woodland?"

"I have no way but this," she answered; "I am a forest-dweller."

"Unattended?" the hermit questioned.

"Unattended," she replied.

"Since when has the forest been your home?"

"Since terror drove me from the city. Ask me no more, for I cannot in safety relate my story. Let it suffice that I fled into the forest to save my life."

"Go in peace," he said.

'Princess Sainthia remembered on what quest

she had come, and hesitated to turn away from the hermit's abode.

"I desire to know where I can procure water, for without it thirst will again overpower me."

'The hermit pointed to a ferny rock twenty yards further on.

"You will find there a natural fountain of pure water. Drink from it whenever you come thirsty this way."

'Thanking him, Princess Sainthia picked up her leaf-cup and hurried to the fountain, in the clear spray of which she plashed for a few moments; then, filling her leaf-cup to overflowing, she carried it carefully to her retreat. "I will reserve this for the morning," she thought, as she placed the cup of water on a large stone in one of the inner archways of the banyan-tree. But late in the evening she was overpowered by a parching thirst, fever having come upon her, and she drank eagerly from the little cup, leaving only sufficient water with which to sprinkle her hot forehead.

'The fever having left her by morning, she prepared to start again for the fountain; but, to her surprise, she discovered, a few yards from the tree, a clean earthen jar placed on a patch of purple knot-grass, and filled with sparkling water.

'In her joy at discovering it she scarcely wondered how it had come there; for her

pilgrimages to the fountain would be attended with danger, since she might be identified by foresters, who, for the sake of the reward, would instantly seize and take her back to the city—the city which she thought of now as a hell of torment.

‘For one day, at least, she would be able to avoid the peril of discovery.

‘But on the next day she saw that the water-jar, which had been emptied by herself overnight, had been refilled, and placed near it were a deer-skin mantle and a wooden staff such as hermits carried.

‘And on yet another morning, when, wearing the deer-skin mantle, she went forth carrying her staff, she found near the replenished jar a quiver full of arrows and a bow.

‘As readily as she had donned the deer-skin, she slung the quiver of arrows across her shoulder, and took up the bow, wondering if she would ever be able to put it to practical use.

‘At first she conjectured that the hermit of whom she had begged for water had brought these things for her use; then she began to suspect that they had been placed there by a spy, to whom her identity was known, and who had cunningly trapped her in her retreat—her discoverer perhaps being Tarjan.

‘Gripping the bow now as a weapon for her

own defence, she walked a few steps forward, and peered cautiously round in search of foot-prints, half expecting, yet dreading, to see the distorted impression of the dwarf's malformed feet. Instead, her gaze fell upon a name formed of blood-red asoka-blossoms arranged in order on the purple knot-grass. The name all shining in flowery splendour was "Roshan."

'She heaved a deep sigh of relief as she realized that her terrifying suspicion was unfounded. No trap had been laid round her, no spy had discovered her hiding-place to betray her, no hideous, deformed feet had made a crooked track to her retreat. She was still in safe hiding from her persecutors; for she had no fear of Roshan, the noble-looking youth she had seen studying texts from the Rig-Veda, and who, when she was parched with thirst, had tendered her the welcome draught of water.

'And looking at his name blazoned in the red flowers, she knew that he had brought water from the fountain each day that she might not again feel the maddening thirst, and that the deer-skin, staff, and bow and arrows were of his providing.

'To fully assure herself of this fact, on the following morning she arose at dawn and, armed with the bow and arrows and wearing

the deer-skin across her shoulder, wandered out among the asokas, of which the great clusters of rich blossoms matched in hue the crimson surge in the eastern sky.

‘Presently she saw Roshan approach to take the empty vessel, which he intended to fill at the fountain.

‘After the three days she had spent in solitary concealment, the sight of him rejoiced her heart; and fearing that he might hurry away and leave her again in isolation, she raised her voice and called to him.

“Wait, my benefactor, and I will accompany you on your errand, and bear a share of your self-sought burden.”

‘Then as she came from under the asoka-boughs, that made a rich background for her beautiful form, she added :

“I pray you teach me how to use this weapon, for indeed I lack skill to let fly the arrows.”

‘Roshan put the water-jar down upon the ground, and, with an air of diffidence, went slowly towards her and made a deep obeisance.

“I am at your command,” he said.

“My wish is not to command, but to obey,” she replied, with a brilliant smile. “Tell me, Sir Benefactor, how I am to place the arrow to the bow.”

"It is easily done," he said; and taking the bow from her hand, he aimed an arrow at a neighbouring tree.

"It seems a difficult task for one so unskilled as myself," she remarked. "It will take me many days to learn to let the arrow fly with true aim."

"Then, unless you forbid me, I will come many days to teach you," he said.

'And every morning for a week he carried water from the fountain to her retreat, and then stayed to instruct her how to bend the bow. But she made no progress, and on the eighth day, after she had made a dozen futile attempts to direct the arrow, he said :

"Your hands are too slender for the task. Let me be your bowman, Princess."

'At the utterance of the title she started, and a look of fear dimmed her eyes that a moment before had been full of bewitching brightness.

"Not Princess!" she exclaimed, in a low, frightened voice. "I am no more than a forest-dweller, waking and sleeping as the birds wake and sleep in the woodlands."

'And gazing intently into her face, he answered :

"So sleeps and wakes King Magna's daughter."

“Hush!” she whispered, “unless you want to betray me to death.”

“I would give my life in your defence,” he replied. “Do not lose confidence in me, sweet Princess, for I have guarded your secret well. The moment I first saw you in the forest, I recognized in you the King’s daughter, and knew whose were the flower-like hands into which I poured the refreshing water.”

“Yet you did not reveal my identity,” she murmured.

“Nor ever shall,” he responded. “But how can you spend your life alone in this great forest? Who will protect you from the savage beasts that prowl in search of human prey?”

‘She looked at him with a new brightness on her rose-fair face; then, with downcast eyes, she said:

“Noble friend, will not you protect me?”

‘He took an eager step towards her, then quickly checked himself.

“I am no more than a hermit,” he said, “and you are the King’s daughter.”

“When my father gave me as an offering, the King ceased to possess a daughter,” she replied, in a firm voice.

“But could a Princess deign to become the wife of a mere recluse?” he asked.

““ Being no longer a Princess, I do not know how to answer that question,” she said.

““ But dare I—dare I——”

‘He broke off without completing the sentence that seemed too presumptuous for him to frame.

““ Dare anything that your heart dictates,” she said; then, with sweet, womanly appeal, she added: ““I am very lonely, very poor, very humble, and I sorely need a protector.”

““ But only if you were my wife could I entirely protect you.”

““ Dear one, what other wish have I?” she said. “Let us go to your kind instructor and consult him as to how you can marry a forest-dweller who claims neither kith nor kin.”

‘Roshan led her at once to the Brahmin, and solicited him to perform for them the *gandharba* service of marriage, which would require no publicity, as they intended to remain together in the forest for the rest of their lives.

‘Having no reason for refusal, the hermit performed the rite, and in a state of bliss Roshan returned with his bride to the tree-colonnade, around which grew the starry jasmines and the blood-red asokas, that formed for the joyful couple a bower of delight.

‘In that retreat they lived for many years,

undiscovered by anyone who would have betrayed them to the King. And in course of time they were accompanied by their children, who, flower-crowned and radiant, awoke with their voices lute-like echoes in the sylvan glades, and linked closer together the heart of Roshan and the heart of his wife—the man and the woman who lived simply and loved simply, having no other wealth than the sweetness which Nature lavished upon them.

‘Prince Vivad recovered from the wasting malady which had so nearly deprived him of his life, and Queen Jasoda outlived the grief she had felt at the loss of her daughter; but at a time when the city seemed at its greatest prosperity, Magna’s kingdom was approached in a hostile manner by invaders from China, and during a desperate contest the dwarf, quaking at the sight and sound of battle, and fearing to drive the King’s chariot of war through a storm of arrows, feigned to fall into a fit at the outset of the attack, and was carried back in safety to the palace, while the King, a warlike figure in his coat of golden mail and gem-blazoned visor, charioted into the thick of the strife.

‘At the close of the day’s battle, when a few hours’ truce was declared, so vast a number of Magna’s followers were killed, and so many

of his war-elephants had been captured by the enemy that, feeling himself already overpowered, he commanded his faithful minstrel, Nur-Lilar, who had shared the dangers of the battle, to remain with the discouraged soldiers to cheer them with martial songs that might animate the crestfallen men with a spirit of valour, and rouse in them a zealous desire for victory. After hurriedly giving Nur-Lilar these instructions, the King goaded his chariot-horses to a terrific speed, and returned to the palace, intending to force the dwarf to accompany him to the scene of action, believing that Tarjan's talismanic presence would prevent the city from being taken.

'For the second time Tarjan's cowardice prevailed. He noticed that the King, in spite of his armour, had on his person several spear-wounds; and Tarjan, dreading lest his own diminutive body should become a target for the enemy's weapons, took advantage of his power, and, working upon Magna's superstition, urged that, defeat being imminent, they should disguise themselves as priests and flee from the city to conceal themselves in a cave in the depth of the forest.

"For," Tarjan said, with peculiar prescience, "nothing will be gained by guarding to-night a city which to-morrow will be turned to ashes."

"Is it nothing that a King's might shall be upheld?" Magna demanded, with passionate pride.

"A King crushed beneath his kingdom has no might to uphold," Trajan answered.

"Fiend! what evil are you predicting?" Magna exclaimed, raising his battle-axe as though to strike the dwarf.

"The demolition of the city before another sunrise," Trajan replied, unmoved by the King's attitude of menace.

"Pigmy prophet, the city might deservedly be demolished were all my subjects as worthless in warfare as yourself," Magna said. "Predict on, petty fool! By what means will so stupendous a ruin be wrought?"

"I am unable to foretell that which to myself is unrevealed," Trajan said. "However, I am convinced that a deadly peril undermines the city, and that Your Majesty can be saved only by prompt flight from the precincts."

'Craftily making mention of his talismanic influence, the dwarf prevailed upon Magna to relinquish his hopeless struggle for victory, and to save himself and his subjects from the complete obliteration to which the city was doomed.

'As though to confirm the ominous words Trajan had uttered, a strange, sultry stillness

gloomed the atmosphere, and a dense, dull-red haze hung between earth and sky.

'With his superstitious belief in the dwarf's magical power fully roused, Magna recalled by stealth what remained of his army, and under cover of the night he, with the inmates of the palace, and all the priests, courtiers, soldiers, and slaves, accompanied by the women and children and a black monkey, which he kept for good luck, fled into the darkening forest.

'And in silence and gloom the City of Jewels stood deserted.

'At dawn, when the invaders from China gathered in force to renew the struggle, none but dead warriors, on the opposing side, were discovered lying within bow-shot.

'Unrepulsed, Magna's enemy marched forward to take possession of the city; but even as the bowmen and spearmen, shouting triumphantly, prepared to seize the citadel, they were dismayed by a sudden, fearful rumbling—a terrific roar under the ground, and the earth trembled and rocked, and was rent in a violent earthquake.

'Away on the toppling mountains swift landslips made treacherous precipices. From one of the peaks ascended clouds of volcanic vapour, followed by showers of smoking ashes,

hot splinters of rock, and boiling streams of lava. Enormous crags were hurled together, and in the shattering concussion dropped to fragments. Across the plains gaped huge serpentinous fissures, closing as rapidly as they opened.

‘During the space of thirty seconds the trees and the houses of the superb city bowed and bowed again to the crimson sun-line of the dawn; then the granite walls and marble edifices tottered, parted, and fell with a mighty crash, and a gigantic column of dust upcurled from the debris, and seemed to meet the sky.

‘Panic-stricken, the invaders let fall their weapons, and cast themselves face downwards upon the heaving ground. And where the town lay in atoms, the earth opened with a thunderous roar, and as the ruins were swallowed up in the yawning cavity, the chasm closed, leaving no trace of what a moment before had been so regal a city.

‘The tremefaction had ceased, and once more the earth’s surface was calm. But vanished was the City of Jewels, over which Magna had reigned in the pride and glory of his kingship. Vanished were the superb mansions, the marble steps and terraces, the alabaster bathing-tanks, the ivory pavilions, the guarded citadel, the State treasure.

‘Vanished!’

‘Fulfilled was the prophecy connected with the King and the dwarf, and low lay the City of Jewels—low in the engulfing terrestrial depths and forever lost to Magna.

‘The invaders, no longer feeling the vibratory motion or hearing the thunderous sound, rose aghast to their feet, and leaving the battle implements where in dismay they had dropped them, gave up their scheme of invasion and fled in the direction of their native domain.

‘In the evening Magna and his courtiers, having felt and witnessed the awful convulsion of the earth, went to the devastated region, and observing the discarded weapons and retreating footprints of the invaders, made certain that they had escaped alive, abandoning in fear and haste the scene of desolation.

‘Deprived of his riches and plunged in grief at the loss of the city, Magna caused to be constructed for his dwelling-place a house of common stones, plastered together with mud, the roof of the edifice consisting of sticks and tiger-grass. Huts composed of mud and thatch were erected for all his subjects, whom he instructed to cultivate the surrounding land, that they might subsist on the produce. And in the midst of the huts, and projecting from

the earth, was a gigantic boulder, upon which, by his royal order, were carved the laws that had been inscribed on the Golden Tablet.

‘Nur-Lilar, the minstrel, having, during his flight into the forest, retained possession of his lyre, entertained the King at night with ornate descriptions of his lost riches, and with songs of the dead city’s glory, until in fancy Magna saw around him his past splendour, and in imagination entered again the royal palace, with its redundance of perfume and pearls, its frescoed walls and gossamer hangings, its blazing jewels, its balconies and pavilions of marble lacework, its mailed guards and fringed standards, its clangour of golden horns and clashing cymbals, its thousand dancing-girls, with slender pale-bronze bodies veiled with spangled gauze, and swaying in the light of a myriad twinkling lamps.

‘While in this manner beguiled, the King ceased to lament his loss, and his features reflected the joy of his visionary splendour. At such times he scarcely heeded that the once gorgeously arrayed dancing-girls were now merely wreathed with forest leaves. The dancer’s slim feet touched the ground as airily as of yore, and the supple grace of the bending forms was not less fascinating than in

bygone days. And the starlight seemed as radiant as had been the light of the myriad lamps.

‘At other times a profound depression would weigh down his spirit, and he would wander aimlessly through the forest, brooding bitterly over his reverse of fortune.

‘Once, and once only, while walking in a remote part of the wood, accompanied by Prince Vivad and Tarjan, Magna entered the grove of blood-red asokas, and through a bower of jasmine beheld the dwelling-place of Koshan and his family—beheld the children of Sainthia, and had no idea that they were his kindred; for there were many such hermit families in secluded glades of the forest.

‘Hearing the voices of the King and the dwarf in conversation, and instantly recognizing the tones, Sainthia made a sign to her husband, and concealed her features by veiling her face in her hands.

‘Seeing in her no more than a hermit’s wife, and respecting her modesty, Magna smiled upon her sons and withdrew; and Tarjan, whose corrupt gaze lingered on her matchless form, believing the King’s daughter to be dead, thought not of her in connection with the graceful recluse.

‘But Sainthia, who had watched between her

fingers her father's every movement, had seen the benign expression which had come to his features as he had looked at her children, and cherished the remembrance of his smile as though it had been a spoken blessing.

' And once, when she knew Magna and Tarjan to be far away in the jungle on an expedition from which they were not likely to return for several days, she stole disguised to her mother's door to gaze at her with tender eyes; and there came an opportunity by which Sainthia was able to touch the hem of Queen Jasoda's robe and lay a flower near her hand; for in Magna's absence his wife passed hours in meditation, her heart filled with remembrance of the daughter she had so fondly loved—the daughter whose fate was wrapped in mystery that left a doubt as to whether she was among the living or the dead.

"Ah, my mother, if I dared but whisper to you that I am near, that the flower resting against your hand was placed there by me! But the secret would be wrung from you; and more than I ever feared my father and his armies, the priests and their dedications, I fear Tarjan, the dwarf—Tarjan, whose malice against me would be as venomous as in the fearful hour when, with the gloating

lust of hate, he would have seen me slain in sacrifice."

'Reflecting' thus, Sainthia crept away from the King's house to return to Roshan, who, screened behind a tree a short distance off, watched anxiously for her reappearance. At her approach he walked quickly forward to clasp her in his arms.

"'Beloved,'" he said, noticing the pensive look on her face, "is it your pleasure to come back to me like this? or is your eagerness to rejoin me outweighed by regret for what you leave behind?"

'She clasped her ivory-fair arms round his neck and gazed deep into his questioning eyes.

"'It is my delight to come back to you,'" she replied. "Dear heart, do you doubt the entireness of my love for you and our children? Nothing on earth could outbalance the happiness I have in being your wife. As to our lowly position in life, a King's sceptre could not serve you better than the hermit's staff you carry, nor could a mantle of royal purple shield you more effectually from the forest-blasts than the vesture of deer-skin you wear. Indeed, I would not exchange our stately tree-colonnade for the finest palace in the world. Life is full of joy for us, and we are content. What more can we want?"

"“You have struck the keynote,” he said ;
“contentment leaves no room for want.”

‘Through the forest glades they walked to the sheltering banyan-tree ; and as they approached their rural home their children ran out gaily from the sylvan shade, and, clasping each other’s hands in play, formed a lovely, laughing circle round Roshan and his wife.

‘In this way the happy days stole one upon another, and Sainthia lived in sweet accord with her husband and children, while Magna, unaware of her existence, reigned peacefully over his rustic kingdom.

‘In course of time villages were built in the neighbouring districts ; and from generation to generation families continued to plough the ground and tend the herds, and trade one with another until prosperity was attained.

‘And although seismic disturbances have since wrecked countless towns, changing at intervals the surface of the earth, the Great Stone—surpassing in antiquity Asoka’s Rock at Kalsi—still rests firmly, though solitarily, above the ground, a monument of the past. For over two thousand years have gone by since the laws were engraved upon the huge boulder which is all that remains to bear witness to the reign of King Magna—the Great Stone,

undisturbed by the passage of time, but isolated, and with its inscription effaced by the passing of ages, yet ever remaining the same Great Stone that had marked the dominion of Magna when he had no crown save the coronel of golden or silvern splendour which was forged on his brow by the bright rays of the sun or the moon.

‘And in our surrounding valley there dwells to-day a decrepit hunchback miser who is descended from Tarjan, the dwarf charioteer; there is also a boy-musician, Lilar by name—by calling a goatherd—who proceeds in a direct line from Nur-Lilar, the King’s minstrel; while the most affluent and honoured zemindars in these parts are lineal descendants of Magna and his courtiers, who, for a score of years, displayed unrivalled pomp in the City of Jewels. . . . Thus at the present time, in one fair daughter of the Doon, lives anew the sweet, flower-like grace of Sainthia, the forest Princess.’

* * * * *

Rukmin had uttered no comment during the preceding narrative; but, flattered and pleased by the significance of the concluding sentence, he had graciously handed Nara the last bell from the sapphired zone of silver worn by Asta.

An ecstatic thrill had run through Nara as his fingers had closed round the guerdon, the holding of which had brought him nearest to the realization of his fondest hopes. In his impassioned transport he had seemed to feel Asta's arms, soft as the tendrils of a voluptuous flower, twined round his neck, her love-warm bosom pulsating against his breast, while her lips breathed in his ear the words, 'Beloved! I am for ever yours!'

* * * * *

For Nara, as the years glided by, the sentence '*Khush raho!*' proved to be more than a mere salutary phrase repeated as a marriage greeting, for after his union with Asta his happiness increased in a manifold degree. Familiarity did not lessen the admiration he had felt towards her when she had seemed beyond his reach. His fervid passion, tempered by domestic intercourse, grew into a deeper, more completive tenderness. That was all the change.

And the longing which had been the innocent prayer of Asta's early days, as it had been the despairing cry of her darkest hours—the desire for motherhood—was granted. She bore children that were a source of pride to herself and their father as well as to Vanita, Isita, and Brinda, all of whom looked lovingly on every

new little face pillowed on Asta's breast. In all five were counted, since, in fullness of time, Asta owned five sturdy sons, each boy giving promise of a noble disposition and the development of unusual splendour of countenance.

The iron bangle had brought to her its traditional blessing, and at times she regarded with thankfulness the symbolic wrist-ring, and praised the gods for the divine gifts that had come with its possession, for she maintained there was no joy on earth so great as the saving joy of wifehood and motherhood—the joy which, during long miserable years, she had despaired of ever possessing.

That dreary time was now to her a declining memory, and her life was too full and sweet for bitter dregs to spoil the cup of her happiness.

She was glad, too, that Kameena and Almos, to whom a son had been born, were satisfied with one another, and that Almos entertained no enmity towards Rukmin. In fact, the two men were on a friendly footing, although the distance separating them prevented their having personal intercourse, and restricted them to an exchange of polite messages to and from Nilang, where Almos and his father, Hiran, were still trading with the Tibetans.

As for Zarrin and Isita, they had never ceased to approve of their son's choice of a wife, and to commend him for the ingenious manner in which he had won her. And Nara himself knew better than any other the true worth of Asta, whose manner remained as tender, and whose eyes retained the softness which had been in ~~them~~ when, from the parapet of the housetop, she had lowered him flowers on a silken thread. Now in countless sweet ways she made her wifely devotion manifest to him, at his feet adoring him, her beauty being ever as the light of his eyes.

And to Asta Nara was still a prince of righteousness, her heart's best beloved; and on sultry nights, when the air was heavy with the fragrance of dropping tree-blossoms...when the Doon was hushed in heat, and out under the shining stars she reclined at his knees, she loved to hear him repeat the stories by which he had won the tiny bells that, linked to a gold chain, he wore as a charm round his neck—a charm that by day and night was never removed from contact with his clear, bronze skin. And Asta still wore the girdle which seemed to encircle her own life, Nara's, and their sons', holding them as within a sacred zone. For in the love of her husband and children she possessed the highest happiness that could be vouchsafed by

the gods to a mortal woman; and henceforth she would see all things through the glamour of her soul's rejoicing, having found the dark chalice of despair a pure fountain of delight that bathed her spirit in perpetual brightness and made her life a living melody.

THE END

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'The picture of Bert Neil in her freshness and independence will strike home to the sympathies of many who are tired by the ordinary society or sensational novel, and her original experience will be followed with interest, not to say amusement.'—*Publishers' Circular*.

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'Bert Neil, bred on the Veldt, preserves her simple unconventionality in London society.'—*Times*.

'Bert is everything that such a heroine should be, down to the boyishness of her name. . . . A pleasant, unsophisticated tale in which most of the characters are nice people to meet.'—*Daily Mail*.

'This novel, one can say after perusal, should command success. The character of Bert is drawn with a masterly hand; there is a fine technique about the work, and the subject with which it deals renders it a notable achievement.'—*Morning Post* (Delhi).

'In every way a noteworthy production.'—*Ceylon Observer*.

'Will be much appreciated by readers of up-to-date fiction.'—*Statesman*.

'An attractive story of a bright, brave English girl born in South Africa. Her adventures are decidedly fresh and diverting.'—*Times of Ceylon*.

'The novel is charmingly fresh and buoyant. Bert, the "Girl Soldier," will endear herself to all who follow her adventures through the all too brief pages which record her young life's history.'—*Mussoorie Times*.

'A fascinating book.'—*Indian Field*.

